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By PAUL FAIRMAN

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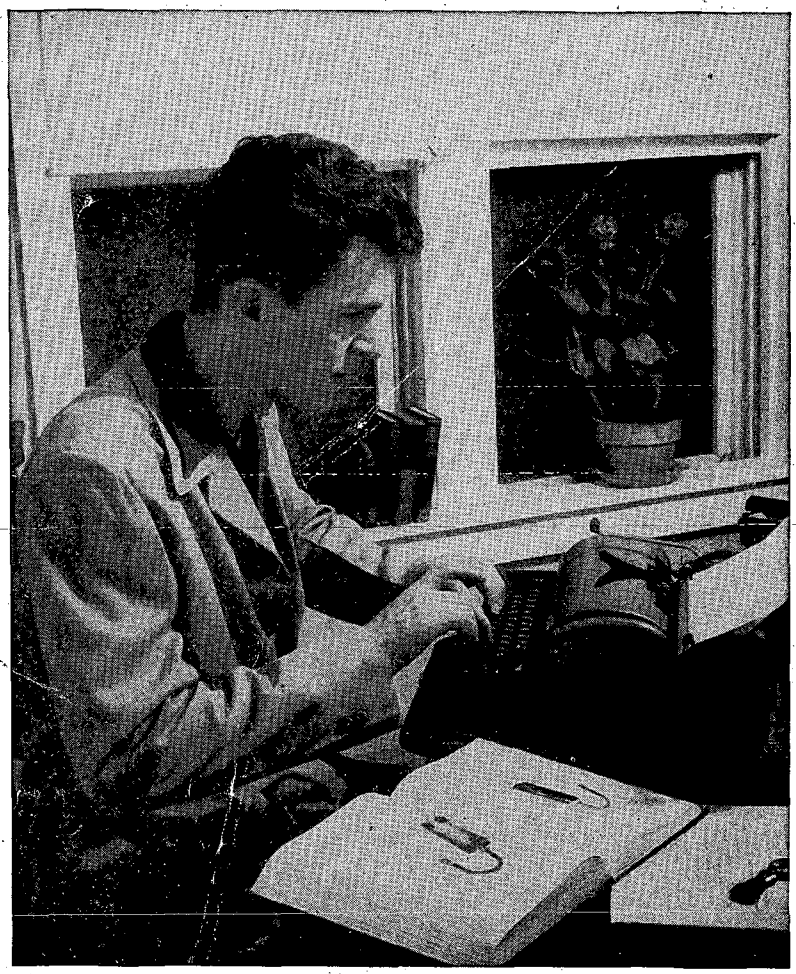

WALTER M. MILLER, JR.

Author of: "DARK BENEDICTION"

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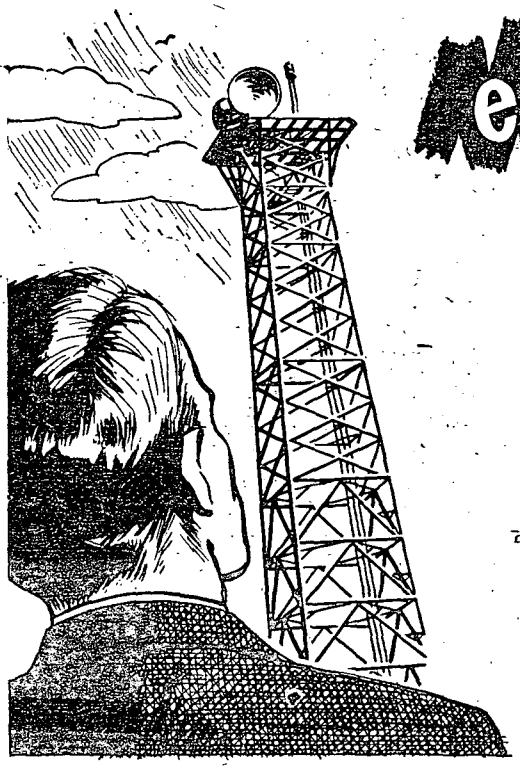

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VOLUME 13 NUMBER 9

All Stories Complete

THE TERRIBLE PUPPETS (Novel—28,500) ..... by Paul W. Fairman 8

Illustrated by H. Dorset

What terrible secret lies behind the success of great men? What does it take to become rich and famous? Brains—luck—opportunity? Or the little men who aren't there?

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED (Short—3,000) ..... by Robert Moore Williams 52

Illustrated by Ed Valigursky

Everybody knew these men were either drunk or crazy. Otherwise, why would they claim to be Martians? But Dr. Harkins didn't think this was so funny. He listened carefully...

THE CATSPAW (Short—5,000) ..... by John McGreevey 60

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

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THE SECRET OF JOHN MARSH (Short-short—2,500) ... by William P. McGivern 70

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DARK BENEDICTION (Short novel—20,000) ..... by Walter M. Miller, Jr. 78

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Front cover painting by Robert Gibson Jones, suggested by

a scene from "The Terrible Puppets"

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The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

LAST NIGHT the world died!

AND WE had ringside seats for the final show. We watched the red-hot fires of hell race through the streets; we saw the wild force of the tidal waves unleash themselves against the puny efforts of man's civilization. The mad forces of the heavens destroyed the handiwork of nature; cities were picked up and swept away in the tidal flow of destruction. Mankind was silenced forever. We watched our Earth being pulled and torn apart as it crashed into the oncoming planet of Bellus. And all was as if it had never been....

IT ALL happened last night at a preview of "When Worlds Collide"—latest in the Hollywood series of science-fiction films. Produced by Paramount Studios—based on the novel by Edwin Balmer and Philip Wylie—this, in our opinion, is not only the best science-fiction movie ever released, it is one of the best films ever put out in the history of Hollywood.

GEORGE PAL, originator of the "Puppetoons", veteran fantasy and cartoon producer, who did the wonderful job on "Destination Moon", was the skillful producer for Paramount Studios of this latest stf story. He has used here all the tricks and knowledge garnered in about 15 years of movie work—and is in great part responsible for this brilliant piece.

IT SEEMS that several of our top astronomers and scientists have found that a hitherto unknown planet (Bellus) is set to crash into Earth. A short time before the imminent crash, one of its satellites (Zirus) will be pulled into Earth's gravitational belt. Destruction—in the form of violent tidal waves, earthquakes, floods. The few who will escape the first danger will be doomed when the two planets actually collide.

IN THE face of open ridicule and contemptuous charges of the politicos and the United Nations, a few scientists—with the financial aid of several big businessmen—inaugurate a project for building a space ship which, theoretically, will be able to make the trip to Zirus, carrying 44 people and enough supplies and live stock to enable a small colony to get started should they find suitable living conditions on the satellite.

ADULT IN all its aspects, "When Worlds Collide" is very swiftly paced; there's action every second. The disaster shots are superb. The few scenes of New York under water—with only the tops of some of the skyscrapers visible as several ocean liners float aimlessly on their sides—brought some uncomfortable rustling from the preview audience. This was hitting close to home. A final monument to man's activities.

THE ORGANIZATION of the entire story has been handled most effectively. Some of the flood scenes and evacuation scenes use actual newsreel shots, lending a feeling of remarkable authenticity. The dialogue is fresh, and the cast of comparative unknowns do an excellent acting job. The love story, the characterizations, are perfect. Nobody is righteous, nobody is too heroic. In a time of panic, each person reacts just as they would in real life, not as they usually do in second-rate thrillers. Sydney Boehm deserves applause for his capable writing of the screenplay.

THE TECHNICOLOR is beautiful, while the interspersed black-and-white shots add much to the setting of the mood.

PARAMOUNT STUDIOS—for "When Worlds Collide" we salute you—and thank you.

THE PLOT for "The Secret of John Marsh" (page 70) was conceived midway between New York and Bremen, Germany, as author Bill McGivern reclined luxuriously on an ocean liner. The story was written in Germany's beautiful Black Forest, and mailed from Paris, which the McGiverns are just leaving for Spain. With all the author's wanderings, his story of a man and his space ship seems a natural consequence. Although unlike the fictional John Marsh, author McGivern has no desire to escape his beautiful and talented wife. In fact, wife Maureen and daughter Megan are right along with him helping to make the trip an exciting and enjoyable one.

WE TAKE pleasure in introducing this month for the first time in our magazine, a new writer—Walter M. Miller Jr. We found his manuscript in a huge pile of stories submitted with our daily mail. No sooner had we read the first page of "Dark Benediction" (page 78) than we were caught—and guarantee that you will be too. The unusual theme of his story, the mood, and the beautiful writing, we're sure will make you a Walter Miller fan. —LES

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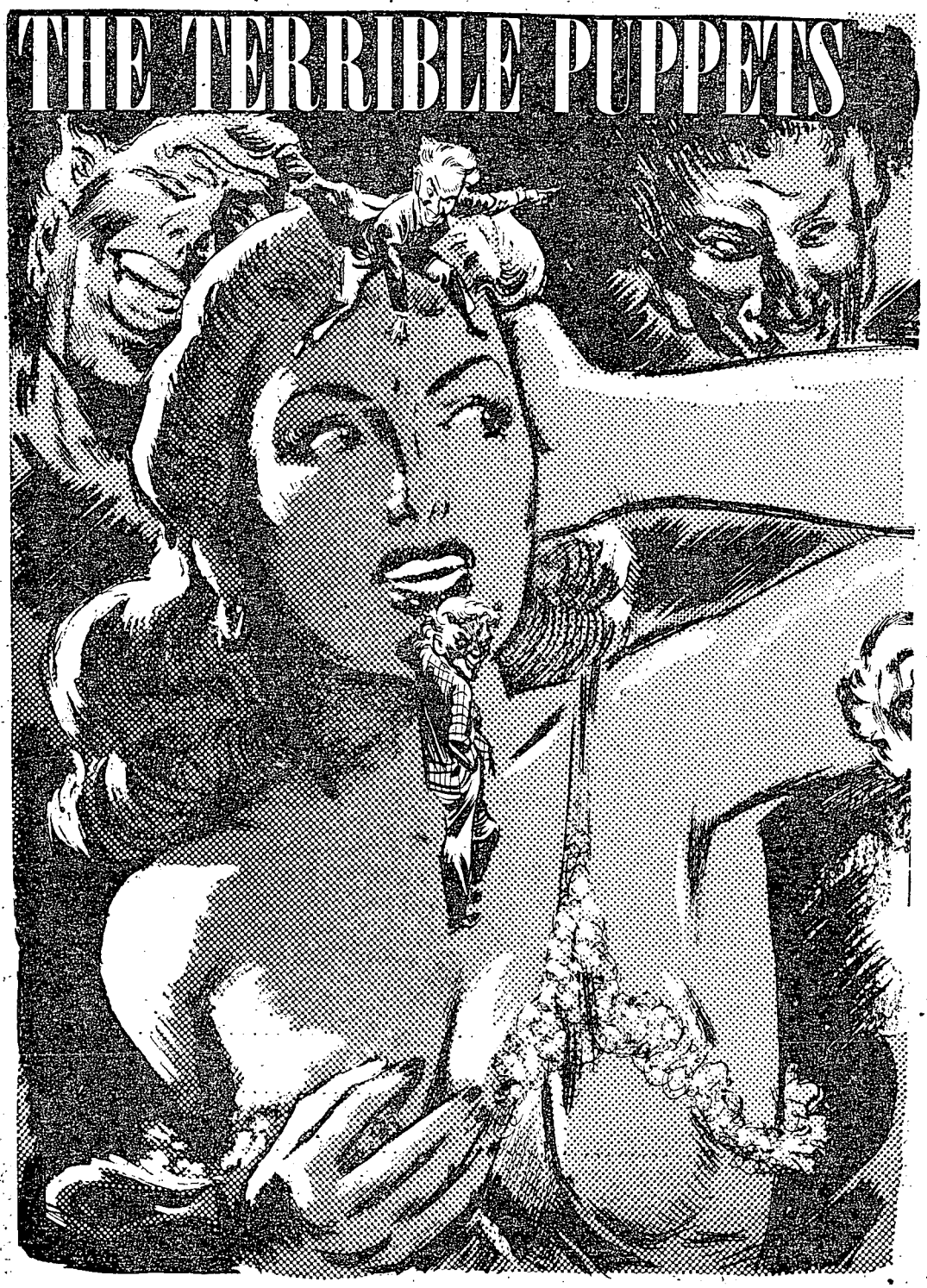

The entire experience was a horrible nightmare—but Marcy wasn't asleep!

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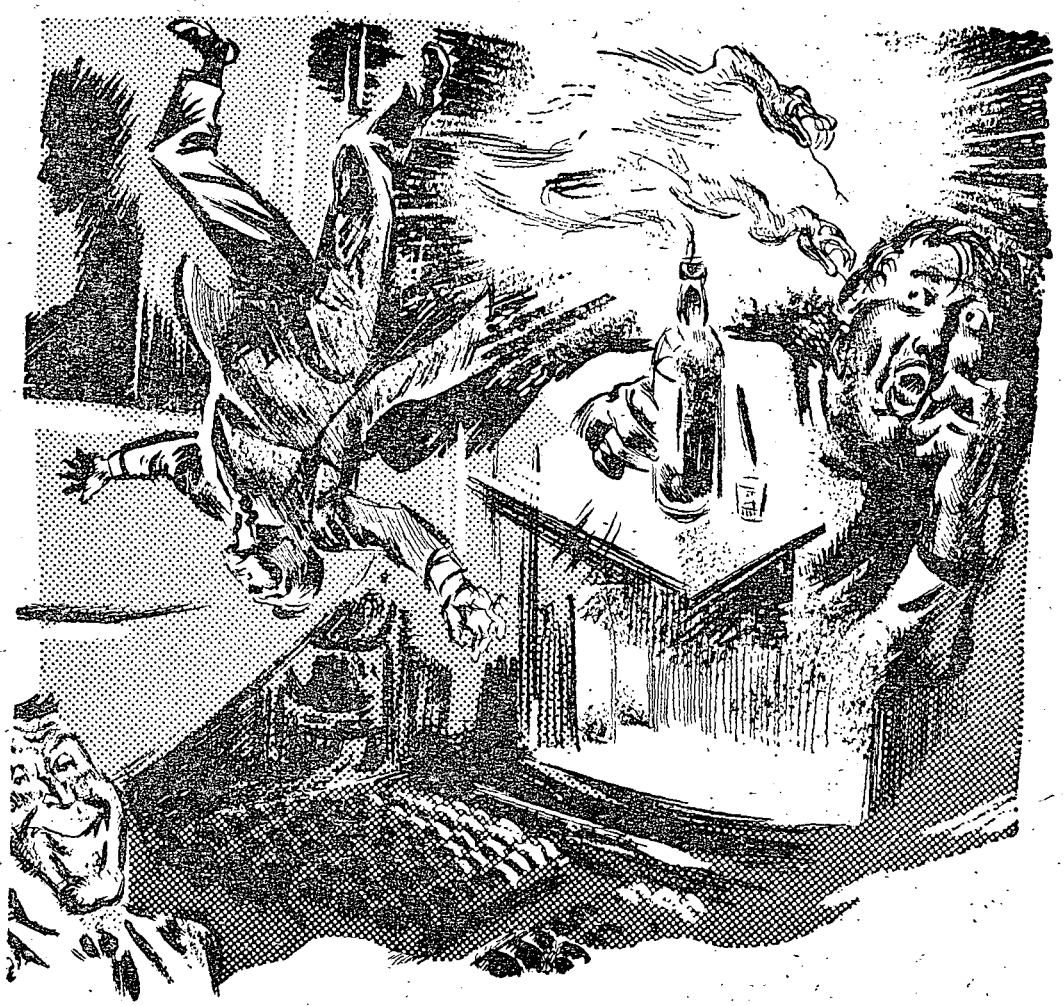
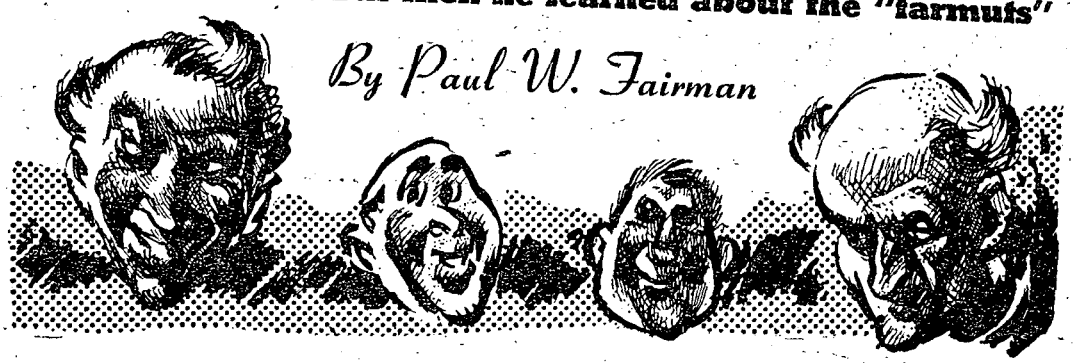


Paul was sure that all he needed to achieve success was ability and luck, and those he had. But then he learned about the "farmuts"

By Paul W. Fairman



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JOSHUA BLENT WAS seventy-two years old. He had leathery skin and stooped shoulders, and he unhesitatingly assumed all the privileges the aged are allowed. Complete frankness is one of these, so Joshua looked critically at Paul Fleming and commented: "Not so high a forehead as your grandfather. Bigger ears though, and maybe a third as good an actor."

Paul Fleming grinned and looked up at the great gilded proscenium of the silent, semi-darkened theater. "You knew the old boy pretty well, didn't you, Joshua?"

"Saw him the first time in 1898, the day I walked in here looking for a job."

"I heard the story. It's one of those legends about Grandfather. He took one look at you and said, 'Forsooth! You're hired! A lad with feet the size of yours will never be blown over by winds of adversity.' And you've been here ever since."

Joshua bristled. "They ain't so big, really." He looked down at his size fourteen shoes. "It's just I was only nineteen then and kind of underfed. That made 'em stand out."

Paul sobered a trifle as he gazed about this place so rich in the glory and traditions of the past. "The old Lyceum," he breathed. "And it's mine. It's back in the family again. Tell me, Joshua—are you surprised?"

The old man shook his head. "Not at all—not at all. Fact is, I been expecting you to buy her in. After all, your grandpa built the Lyceum. He made himself famous here. Then your dad came along and did it all over again. I knew you'd never let it be torn down for a parking lot."

A look as of a cloud passing over the sun, swept Paul Fleming's face. "It wasn't that, Joshua. Not directly, anyhow. It was something else—a feeling—unexplainable. Family loyalty maybe, but I don't think so."

"Regardless what it was, it's proper and fitten you should be here. Your grandpa—"

Paul reached a swift hand, laid it on the old man's arm. "Joshua—I want you to tell me—I want you to be perfectly frank—honest."

"About what, son?"

"Dad—and Grandfather. I've heard a great deal, of course, just as everyone else has, but you're the one who should know."

Joshua Blent seemed mildly surprised. "Didn't your ma tell you all about them? She must of been pretty proud of your pa. Of course, toward the last, he—well, both him and your grandpa went kind of—"

Eager now, Paul Fleming pulled the ancient caretaker down into a dusty seat. "No, Joshua. She told me next to nothing. After father died—I was fourteen then—my mother went into a sharp decline."

Joshua was calculating with much movement of his withered old lips. "That'd make you about six when your grandpa died from the—"

"That's what I wanted to ask you, Joshua. Was it really an accident? Did Richard Fleming fall out of that balcony, or was he pushed?"

Joshua was slow in replying. "There was a lot of talk about that, wasn't there? Lots of chatter by folks who didn't know nothing about it."

"A great deal of talk and rumor. It was said that Richard Fleming was dead drunk that night, wandering about the theater at three o'clock in the morning raving like a madman. They said, too, that he was really insane for weeks before he fell."

"Pish-tosh. Nothing but pure pish-tosh."

"And another thing. My father died in bed, but there was a lot of mystery about that, too. I was away at school when it happened, but they say he was strapped down and he died raving

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like a patient in the last stages of alcoholism."

BLENT FAVORED young Fleming with a quick penetrating look. "Didn't you ever ask your ma about these things?"

"No—no I never did, really. You see, I never got close to my mother—really close. The thing I remember about her was the terrible change that came over her after my father's death. Up to that time, she was the gayest, most beautiful woman I ever knew."

"You're right about her being beautiful. I remember the night she sang for the first time—right up there on that stage opposite your father in that light opera of his—*The Chinese Girl.* It just about knocked New York off its pins. In 1926 that was, and not a soul in town having any idea your ma could sing a note. You ought to read what the critics said."

"I have. And that's another part of this damn mystery. Rumor had it that my mother couldn't sing—that she had no musical talent and no voice whatever up to the time she went on the stage with my father."

"Now isn't that pretty silly?" Joshua asked. "How could she have been without any voice when she got up there with even the top balcony filled and all the standing room gone and brought the whole audience to its feet? Twelve curtain calls, I remember."

"I suppose that's true, but let's get down to the point. Let me ask my questions. Was Richard Fleming pushed off that balcony?"

"Of course not. It was an accident."

"Was he drunk or insane at the time?"

"No."

"Was my father insane when he died?"

"Your daddy did a little drinking. I can't deny that. But he wasn't crazy."

"Then he did die from drink? He was strapped to his bed with delirium tremens?"

"Well, now, after David left the Lyceum here—after they took him away—I didn't see him no more. I went to his funeral, and then the next thing I knew your ma was trying to have the Lyceum torn down. It was expensive though, so she sold it to this millionaire Vickers and took you to India."

Paul Fleming stared moodily at the darkened stage. "She was never the same after that. She failed fast and died in 1941. And she made me promise never to come back to New York—never to come near the theater again."

"And you broke the promise."

"I had to, Joshua. I couldn't help myself. I stuck it out in India for quite a few years. Then, when I heard the Lyceum was going to be torn down for a parking lot, I couldn't stay away. There was something inside me, I guess. Maybe you'd call it family pride."

"Doesn't matter," Blent said quietly. "You're here and that's that. You own the Lyceum again."

"And I'm glad to see they kept you on, Joshua. I'm going to need you around here. I'll bet there's no one else on earth who knows this old building like you do."

BLENT CHUCKLED. "That's why I'm here. Vickers let me stay because I know every water pipe, every steam valve, every electric wire in the place. I'm an asset so far as the Lyceum is concerned."

"Well, you'll go right on as before, Joshua."

"What do you plan to do with the old girl? Now you got her, you aren't just going to let her stand idle, are you?"

"I don't know. I'm not a theatrical

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man. I inherited no talent from either Dad or Mother."

"You got talent," Joshua Blent said quietly. "Nobody with the name of Fleming can be without it."

"You're wrong there."

"No, I'm not. Let me tell you something, son. Your grandpa didn't have talent either—or so people thought. He was a contractor and he built the Lyceum for a syndicate. Then they went broke and he took it over because he had to. That was the year your grandmother died."

"He didn't really want the theater?"

"Certainly not. He didn't know nothing about the theater. But a year later he was acting up there on that stage; acting in *Captain Seven,* a play he wrote and produced. It ran fifteen months."

"One of the stories that made him a legend in the American Theater," Paul said with some bitterness. "But I'll never live up to it. As a matter of fact, I don't think I want to."

Joshua Blent got slowly to his feet, his old bones creaking from the effort. "Speaking of mysteries, son, you never heard the real one about this theater—not the real one."

"What is it? Tell me."

Joshua took a moment before answering. Then he said, "No rats."

"No rats? What are you talking about?"

"Just what I said. In all the years I've been here in the Lyceum, I've never seen no rats."

There was something in Joshua Blent's tone and manner; something that diverted Paul even more than the inconsistency and triteness of the subject. Paul quelled a certain impatience and said, "That's remarkable."

An almost pathetic eagerness came into the old man's voice. "Isn't it though? They steer clear of the Lyceum."

"What do you use? Poison?"

"Don't use nothing."

"And you've never seen a rat?"

"Not a...well..." Blent dropped his eyes. "Well...I did see one rat... long time ago."

Paul frowned. Was this something Joshua Blent wanted to talk about? If so, Paul was willing to humor him. "Tell me about it."

BLENT'S HANDS trembled. He locked them together to hide the fluttering. His lean throat worked. "Ain't important," he muttered, and shrugged his shoulders. "Shouldn't have brought it up. Not important at all."

Paul was about to reply when footsteps, deadened by the thick aisle carpeting, caught his ear. He turned. A girl was coming toward them. In the half-light, Paul could see the wealth of wind-blown bob framing her face; the slim, reasonably good figure; the flash on nylon-clad legs.

Joshua Blent turned. "Morning, honey." Then, to Paul: "This is Marcy Lynn. Don't think you've met Marcy yet. She's the only other employee you got here 'cept me, and Marcy's only part time. I never was one to fuss around with figures, so Marcy looks to the bills and things like that and gets reports ready for Vickers. But of course it'll be you now instead of him."

While Joshua rambled, Paul kept his eyes on the girl. She smiled back at him. Marcy had an honest face, Paul decided; wide set eyes; a mouth possibly a trifle large; teeth out of a tooth paste ad. She was pretty—attractive—but only in the sense any average young woman is pretty and attractive to any average young man.

Paul took her hand and let go of it when letting go seemed the logical thing to do. "I'm very glad to know you."

A certain special interest was obvious in Marcy's manner. After all, Paul

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Fleming was to some extent a special person. Son of the fabulous David Fleming, grandson of the even more fabulous Richard Fleming, Paul could justly be rated for more than a casual hello and a passing glance.

"I'm glad to know you, too."

"Have you worked for Joshua very long?"

The oldster broke in before Marcy could reply: "'Bout three years now, ain't it Marcy?"

She nodded.

"Nice girl, Marcy. Not a flippity like lots of them nowdays. And she knows the Lyceum almost as good as I do."

Marcy apparently felt called on for an explanation. "I only work two days a week, but Mr. Blent lets me come in anytime just to wander around."

"You like the theater?"

A SIGH WAS audible in the girl's answer. "I've been in love with it since I was a little girl. And the Lyceum..." Marcy raised her eyes to the flying arches above the orchestra. "It fills me with awe. The tradition—the memories—the ghosts of great actors and actresses who played on that stage. Sometimes I can almost hear the lines from great plays echoing up to the third balcony." Marcy stopped. The blush could not be seen in the dim light, but no doubt it brightened her cheeks. "I'm—I'm sorry."

Blent was squinting up toward the ceiling. "The Lyceum's got the best acoustics in the world," he asserted with complete practicality. "Don't need no loud speakers in here. A person in the last row of the top balcony can even hear heavy breathing from the stage." Blent's line of thought changed abruptly. "Suppose you'd kind of like to look around?"

"I certainly would."

"Then I'm going to let Marcy do the honors. Ain't as good at getting up and down stairs as I used to be. I'll hobble back and turn on the high lights. If you go into the basements, you'll find flashes in a box stage left." With that, the aged caretaker labored off up the slight incline of the aisle toward the inner lobby.

"What would you like to see?" Marcy asked.

Paul, standing quite close to the girl now, was conscious of the clean line of her profile; the sweep of throat above the collar of her ruffled blouse.

"The works. The whole thing. That is, if it wouldn't tire you out."

Marcy laughed. "I could never get tired in any theater. And the Lyceum—"

"Let's go then." Paul felt suddenly light-hearted. The somber mood dropped from him and he had the feeling of pleasant adventure ahead.

At that moment, the great crystal chandelier in the center of the house bloomed up into thousands of candle power and the effect was arresting—startling.

It was a little like turning a spotlight on a decayed and aging dowager; like suddenly revealing the wrinkled and sagging skin under the powder and paint—the old bones beneath marred flesh.

The seats stretching row on row seemed hostile, like brooding ancients startled from reveries. The empty balconies arched across the rear of the house.

"A funeral. But nobody came."

"What did you say?"

PAUL GLANCED at Marcy. He flushed. "I—I don't know. I spoke unconsciously. I must have given words to a feeling that came over me."

She seemed puzzled. "It depresses you?"

"No. Of course not." He smiled,

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trying to make it a cheerful smile. "You'll get used to me after you've known me a while. Let's go."

There was a flight of wooden steps leading over the orchestra pit to the stage. Paul followed Marcy across this bridge, his eyes on her slim ankles. He heard the echo come back out of the emptiness as her heels clicked across the bare boards of the stage.

Marcy stopped and pointed upward. "The flies are straight above us. They go clear to the ceiling—six floors of —well, nothing. There are steel catwalks up there."

"Did you ever climb to the top?"

She laughed. "Lots of times. If you ever want to feel really lonely sometime—"

"I'll never want to."

A utility box in the wings yielded a pair of flashlights in working order. "I'll show you the dressing rooms first. To me they're the most interesting part of the theater. They're where you can get closest to the wonderful people who thrilled audiences so long ago."

Paul slanted the beam of his flash across the line of her cheek. He could see the sparkle in her eyes. "You really are in love with the theater, aren't you?"

And it was strange—very strange. As he watched her, Marcy seemed to freeze. Her head was tilted slightly upward, her lips parted, as though she were listening, as though transfixed by a fairy trumpet out of the land of make-believe.

Then it was over. She laughed. "You must think I'm a bobby-soxer —one of those weird characters who chase celebrities down the street with a pad and a pen."

"I don't think anything of the kind."

Marcy reached out and pushed a dusty button on the wall. "There are safety lights at intervals all through the basements. Some of them should still be working."

Now she moved swiftly down a ramp and opened a door upon the panel of which a gilt star had been painted. Two points of the star had surrendered to time.

Inside, Marcy pushed still another switch and the room blazed with light from a circle of unshaded bulbs around a dressing table mirror. Dust blanketed everything. To Paul, it was gloomy, depressing, as though the bones of the long-dead lay exposed to public view.

MARCY HERSELF was the only attractive thing in the room, so Paul kept his eyes on her without apology. She regarded the dressing table with a starry-eyed fixation; she advanced and ran her fingers across the mirror—reverent fingers that left two streaks of brightness in the coat of grime.

"Think," she breathed, "of the glamorous people—the great names—the talented stars who have sat in this chair applying their makeup while the audience waited out in the theater."

Paul had the feeling he would have been short-tempered and abrupt with anyone else under these circumstances; with anyone but this taffy-haired, stage-struck girl called Marcy Lynn. Even as it was, he shivered slightly. "It's chilly in here. I suppose the place hasn't been heated in years."

Marcy was immediately contrite. "I'm sorry. Please forgive me. I'm acting like the rubberneck instead of the guide."

"Not at all."

"We'll move on, shall we?"

"Let's do. I just want to get a general idea of the layout." He was suddenly afraid that he'd offended her. He laughed. "Just so I won't get lost if I wander in here alone sometime."

But Paul knew that wasn't the real reason at all. He didn't like this ancient, moldy mausoleum he had acquired. He didn't even begin to like

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it now that the glamor of distance had vanished. But a delicious feeling of intimacy flooded him regarding Marcy Lynn. He would enjoy wandering about in dank and forgotten rooms so long as she was close to him.

And as long as we're down here together, he thought, she has to stay close.

Later, with the chill increased, the gloom even deeper, Marcy said, "This is as far down as we can go. The third basement."

"Then I suppose we'd better start back." He had been amazed at the labyrinth of cement and stone through which they'd passed; the heap after heap of drab, discarded scenery; the ponderous, rusted machinery that had once lifted sections of the stage.

Marcy smiled. "Do you think you can find your way around now?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't even begin to."

They quitted the last subterranean storeroom and Paul took Marcy's arm as they moved up a long cement corridor. The warmth of her flesh in his fingers was good.

Marcy said, "Do you plan to open the Lyceum again, Mr. Fleming?"

"Don't be so formal. The name is Paul."

"All right—Paul. Do you intend—Please! You're hurting me."

HE HAD come to a sudden halt, crouched slightly forward, all senses alert. He released his suddenly tightened grip on her arm, but neglected to apologize. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"That—that odd noise." Paul's gaze ranged up and down the corridor. "There," he said. "It seemed to come from beyond that wall."

"I didn't hear a thing."

"I did."

Marcy seemed suddenly nervous—ill at ease.

Paul had retraced a few steps and had his flash trained close to the right wall. He was studying its gray surface. He scraped a fingernail across the surface, studied the result.

Marcy's flash played nervously along the low ceiling. "Maybe we had better go back. It's getting very chilly down here."

"Marcy! This isn't cement! At least, not this section. It's painted gray and it's rough, to resemble the rest of the corridor wall, but it's wood."

"Possibly," she returned. But with an odd disinterest which Paul overlooked in his excitement.

He put his ear to the wood. His eyes lighted with conviction. "I knew I heard it. Listen. Put your ear right there."

In expressionless silence, Marcy complied.

"Do you hear it now?"

She straightened, stiffly. "I can't hear a thing."

Paul laughed. "No rats, eh?"

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"Upstairs, Joshua spun me a yarn about there being no rats in the Lyceum. But if those aren't rats running around in there, I don't know up from down."

Paul straightened, then bent forward again, completely engrossed in a new discovery. "Look, Marcy. There was a door here once. See it? See the outline? The knob and the hinges were taken off and it was nailed shut and painted over. That must have been years and years ago."

Marcy seemed affected by the dank unhealthiness of the place. "Let's go upstairs, Mr. Flem—Paul. I didn't bring a jacket. I'm getting chilled to the bone."

Paul was immediately contrite. "I'm sorry. Here, take mine."

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He was half out of his suit jacket before Marcy could object. "No—no. We'll be out of here in a moment. I won't need it."

THE AIR warmed perceptibly as they approached the upper levels. Back in the auditorium, Marcy had almost completely recovered. Only traces of her strange, frightened mood remained.

"I imagine Joshua is in the office," she said. "That's where he spends most of his time."

"Good." Paul, no longer bored and depressed, had a briskness of manner not before apparent. "I'll have a talk with him. Regardless of what comes in the future, I want this place cleaned up. I'll have Joshua get a crew of men working on it."

Marcy laid a quick hand upon his arm. "Then you are going to reopen the Lyceum?"

"I don't know. Getting a good play isn't too easy, from what I've heard. But I want to see what the place looked like in Grandfather's day. It won't cost an awful lot."

Marcy crossed to the empty checkroom and picked up her coat.

"You're leaving?"

"Yes. I have an appointment and this isn't the day I work for Joshua. I just dropped in."

"To meet me?"

There were only slight signs of confusion. "Yes. Joshua called me."

"I'm going to call you, too. That is, when I get your number."

"Joshua has it."

"Fine. Are you going to be busy tonight?"

Marcy hesitated.

"I'll take you to dinner and we'll call it business. I want to talk to you about the Lyceum."

"What about the Lyceum?"

"Well—for one thing, we'll discuss your coming to work here full time."

"But there isn't enough work."

"There will be. With men around cleaning—"

Marcy laughed. "I suppose I must be nice to the boss or—"

"Dinner tonight then?"

"All right."

"I'll pick you up at eight."

"Joshua has my address. Goodbye."

After Marcy left, Paul climbed a flight of stairs to the office and found Joshua nodding in a swivel chair.

THE OLD man raised his head and with some effort lifted one knee off the other so both feet touched the floor. "You through looking around already?"

"Yes," Paul said, "Marcy had to leave."

Paul drew a straight-backed chair close to Joshua and sat down. "I've made a decision."

"Already?"

"Yes. I'm going to clean up the Lyceum. Restore the old girl to her former glory."

"That'd be quite a job."

"It doesn't matter. I've got the money. We'll call it a tribute to my illustrious sires."

"What you going to do after you clean her up?"

Paul arose from his chair and began pacing the floor. "I don't know. Nothing, probably. But when she's grand and gaudy again—well, we'll see."

Paul turned and looked closely at Joshua Blent. "Do you feel up to it?"

"Me? Sure. Always did like to boss people around. Just give me the word."

"You've got it."

Paul grinned and resumed his pacing. He had brightened perceptibly. A new briskness had come into his manner. Joshua eyed him with calculation.

"Looks like somebody lit a fire under you, young fellow. You sure it's just this dusty old show house?"

"Cerainly. What else?"

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"Dunno. Dunno. I was only thinking."

"Oh, another thing. You'd better call in some exterminators. Get them started cleaning out the rats."

Joshua reacted instantly. "What you talking about?"

Paul remained silent, grinning at Blent.

"Oh," the latter said. "A joke, eh?"

"Not a joke. Not important, maybe, either, but since you made a point of it earlier, I thought I'd bring it up. We were walking down a corridor in the basement and I heard noises through the wall. I found a section of the wall was wood and had been painted over. There was a door there once, I think. Anyhow, I heard rats scurrying around beyond the door."

Joshua took his time about answering. "That would have been Corridor C—over in the prop section." He looked up quickly. "Sure they was rats?"

Paul shrugged. "What else? But don't take it so hard."

"Ain't seen a rat in this building for years." Joshua muttered. "Only one in all the time—"

Paul laid a hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry. I shouldn't have mentioned it. Didn't know it would upset you like this."

Paul took another quick turn around the small office, his mind filled with plans. He turned back to find Joshua regarding him with a fixed stare. Joshua said, "Do you mind running along, son?"

Paul stopped in sudden surprise. "Why—of course not. I have to leave anyhow. I have some things to do."

"It ain't that I don't like your company. It's just that I got a little thinking to do. Got to rattle something around in my mind, and I ain't good at pondering when people are around."

"Sure, old timer." Paul took in the obviously perturbed caretaker with a quick, warm feeling of affection. "You sit here and ponder all you want to. I'll be back tomorrow and we'll start laying plans."

He left the office. At the door, he glanced back to see Joshua Blent staring straight ahead, a blank, fixed look on his wrinkled face.

THERE WERE potted palms, soft music by one of the land's top bands, snowy linen and sparkling silver, silver to match the sparkle of the champagne.

Paul looked across the table at Marcy. He said, "You're going to think me an awful fool."

"Why?"

"Either that, or you're going to think I fall for every girl I meet."

Marcy had no answer for this, and Paul rushed on: "But there's one thing you must understand. You see I haven't come in contact with very many girls. That is—"

Marcy encouraged him with a smile.

"You see, I lived in India most of my life. There were girls of course—very nice English girls—but I wasn't much of a mixer. I spent most of my time in the men's clubs, or out in the hills with a rifle."

The color of Marcy's eyes deepened. "I don't think you're a fool, Paul, and I doubt very much if you fall for every girl who comes along."

"Thanks. Now I'll make a direct statement. "I love you, Marcy. I want you to marry me."

Marcy searched for words. Paul, sensing the trend of her reply, sought to forestall it. "I know. We've just met. We're hardly acquainted with each other. You're going to say we need more time."

"It is a—a little abrupt."

"Marcy darling, my grandfather didn't know grandmother existed twenty-four hours before he married her. My father and mother went together exactly one week before they were married. Okay, you can tell me

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both of them moved too fast, but in both cases it worked out wonderfully. You see, Marcy, love doesn't go by the calender—not in my family, at least."

"That may all be true, but a girl needs a little time—a little while to—"

"Of course, darling, but time is precious when a guy's in love. How much time do you want?"

"Would—would ten minutes be too long?"

"Marcy—Marcy! You mean—?"

"Paul..." Marcy's hand trembled as she laid it on his. "Paul, there's one thing—you know so little about me—practically nothing—"

"That doesn't matter. I know all I need to!"

"You may be in for some surprises. Wouldn't you rather have them before—"

"Marcy, let's get out of here." He glanced at his watch. "We can be in Connecticut in an hour, darling. In two hours we can be married."

She was gazing at—or rather through—a spot just over Paul's head. Her mind seemed far away. "You and I," she whispered. "You and I and the Lyceum!"

"Marcy darling, did you hear me? Did you hear what I said?"

Marcy brought herself back to the present. "Oh—oh yes, darling. I'm ready. I'm ready to go with you!"

JOSHUA BLENT was not in the office of the Lyceum Theater the next morning. Hand in hand, Paul and Marcy left the small cubicle and went into the auditorium. Paul took a deep breath and yelled, "Josh! Josh! It's us! Where are you?"

The sound thundered up into the arches, came back and smashed against their ear drums multiplied many times. They winced; then Paul grinned.

"I forgot."

"You'll make us both deaf, darling. Remember—this is the Lyceum. The finest acoustics in the world."

"I won't forget again. I wonder where he is?"

The echoes died into silence; a silence broken by a tired voice not much above a whisper: "Down here in the front row."

They walked down the center aisle and found him in the end seat staring into the orchestra pit. Paul slapped him on the shoulder. Joshua winced.

"Hang onto the arms of your chair, Josh. Get a tight hold. Now, take a look at the world's happiest couple. Mr. and Mrs. Paul Fleming. We are graciously accepting all congratulations."

Joshua's gaze was more abstract than anything else. "Uh-huh. I know. Read about it in the early edition. Kind of sudden, wasn't it?"

"As I told my blushing bride—the Fleming brand of love knows no timetable."

"Congratulations to both of you."

Marcy was bubbling. "Well, I like that! Not even a smile. "We're married, Joshua! It wasn't a funeral. It was a wedding!"

Joshua said, "Look, honey. I'm an old man. I don't get excited much anymore. But that don't mean I'm not happy for you. I'm real glad you two are going double."

She bent over and kissed him on the cheek. "I have you to thank for it, Josh. If you hadn't hired me—"

"Then you maybe kind of owe me a favor, honey?"

"Of course, Josh. Anything."

"All right. Fine. I wonder if maybe you'd go down to the corner and bring an old codger back some coffee. Whistle's kind of dry."

PAUL WAS on the verge of voicing an objection. Marcy's hand re-

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strained him. "I'll be glad to, Josh. And I'll bet you want me to take my time."

"Sure. Take all the time you want to."

Marcy whispered into her husband's ear: "He wants to talk to you, darling."

"That's right," Joshua said. "There's something on my mind. Sit down, Paul."

"But Marcy's my wife. Anything you have to tell me—"

But she was already gone, up the aisle and toward the street.

"Sit down, Paul."

Paul dropped into the seat Joshua vacated as he moved over one. Paul was silent, not sure he liked this incident.

"You got a nice girl, son. Make it your business to be happy."

"Thanks, Joshua. It won't be hard."

Almost a full minute of silence before Paul said, "You were going to tell me something, Josh."

"Yeah—yeah, I was. It's going to sound kind of funny to you, but when you know me better, you'll understand I ain't a long-nose—not a buttinsky at all. I'm just an old codger that was loyal to your grandpa when he was alive and to your father when he was alive—and to both of them a long time after—even up to now."

"This thing you have to tell me—is it about Marcy?"

"No—no, son. Not about her. If it was, I wouldn't have sent her away. It's about Richard Fleming. And after him—David Fleming."

"I'm listening."

"I wouldn't tell you even now, but it looks like fate stepped in. Otherwise, you'd never have found that boarded-up room down in the basement."

Sudden impatience swept through Paul. He started to speak, then subsided. Better to let Joshua continue in his own way. Joshua was a man who wouldn't be rushed.

"I ain't very good at words," Joshua said. "Not good at all. But let me give it to you and then you can ask questions."

"Tell it your way, Josh."

"Thanks, son. It was in 1934—in April. The 9th of April. That night's pretty famous in theatrical history. We were playing *The Seventh Devil* here at the Lyceum. Your grandpa wrote the play and was starring in it. I remember it was during intermission after the first act. The curtain had just come down and I was standing by an exit in the outer lobby. A prop boy ran up to me. He was breathing heavy and he looked scared. He said—"

* * * *

"—Mr. Blent! Mr. Fleming wants to see you in his dressing room. He's—you'd better hurry."

Joshua Blent always wore evening clothes when a play was running in the Lyceum. His basic functions were backstage—his duties mainly with the boilers, the props. But as Richard Fleming's right hand, he enjoyed privileges not commonly bestowed upon a building superintendent. The personnel, from the box office man and manager to the lowliest prop boy, knew it was well to have the friendship of Joshua Blent.

And it was to everyone's good fortune that Joshua Blent was not an overbearing man. He said, "All right, sonny. You skip back where you come from and don't step on any ladies' trains. You might pull their bustles off."

The boy grinned and was gone. Joshua looked at his watch, then went to the door giving into the far-right aisle, moved down under the expensive boxes flanking the stage, and disappeared through a curtained opening into the wings.

He was greeted by a myriad of faces. The cast, huddled together as though awaiting Joshua's arrival, parted like water to let him through.

"Something wrong?" Joshua asked.

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The ingenue answered him. "Mr. Fleming's mad about something. When he went to his dressing room, he pushed right through Frank Dale—knocked him down!"

The juvenile was rubbing his shoulder. "Didn't give me time to even get out of his way. He looked—well, he looked like he'd been drinking."

"Never mind what he looked like," Joshua said sharply. "And don't knot up here. Somebody might want to get by."

Joshua went on down the ramp and tapped on Richard Fleming's dressing room door. An oddly choked voice bade him enter.

RICHARD FLEMING sat in one corner of his dressing room. He'd taken the straight-backed chair from the makeup table and had placed it in the V of an empty corner. He sat on the chair in a crouched and defensive position as though he'd been expecting some manner of physical assault. He was breathing heavily, and only greasepaint kept his face from looking exactly like a death mask with eyes.

He said, "Get them out, Josh. Get rid of them!"

"You aren't feeling good, Mr. Fleming?"

"I said—get them out."

"I sure will. But who? Who do you want me to get rid of?"

"Everybody—all of them. They're in the way and I can't stand it any longer!"

"Maybe a little brandy would help. Shall I bring some?"

"Yes—a whole bottle. But get them out first."

Joshua looked helplessly around the room.

"Not in here, you fool! Everybody outside!"

"You mean you want the building emptied?"

"That's it! Clear them away! Send everybody home! I can't stand it any longer!"

"But, Mr. Fleming, it's almost time for the second act—"

"Damn the second act! Damn all the acts and all the plays and all the theaters ever built."

"Yes, Mr. Fleming."

"Clear the auditorium!"

"The audience? They paid—"

"Give them their money back, and my personal curse with every dollar. Send the cast home! Get every living soul out of this theater! I can't stand it any longer, and they're in my way!"

The caliber of Joshua Blent was revealed in the way he said, "Of course I will, Mr. Fleming. You want me to go, too?"

"No. I might want you. God knows I want somebody! Bring me some brandy—then you go up to the office and stay there."

Joshua opened the door. "Do you want me to call a doctor, Mr. Fleming?"

The actor sprang to his feet. "In God's name—no! Can't you obey orders? Can't you do what I tell you?"

Joshua left, closing the door behind him. At times like this, he did not look for answers. He only did what he was told. He took a bill from his pocket and pushed it into the hand of a prop boy hovering nearby.

"Go out and buy a bottle of brandy. Three Star Hennessey. Bring it right back here to me."

JOSHUA went to the stage manager. "Make an announcement," he said. "Tell them Mr. Fleming is sick. The play won't go on. Give them their money back." He went here and there in the theater, giving the necessary orders, seeing that they were carried out. He pushed through the line waiting before the box-office, returned backstage and took the brandy from the waiting prop boy.

"All right, son. Go on home."

The lad put on his coat and left. He was followed shortly by the stage manager who paused to ask Joshua questions. He got no answers. Only the sound of the key turning in the lock as he walked up the alley toward the street.

Joshua knocked again on Richard Fleming's door. Apparently the actor had not moved. His eyes burned as he took the bottle.

"Are they all gone?"

"Backstage is cleared. There's still a line in front of the box-office."

Richard Fleming came erect with a feverish movement. He put an arm around Joshua Blent's shoulder. "Thank you, Josh! You're a good man—good man!"

"I'll be in the office if you want me."

"No—no. Sit down, Josh. I want to talk to you. I want to get rid of what's piled up inside me like garbage in a city dump. I've got to get rid of it!"

"Certainly, Mr. Fleming."

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Joshua sat down, felt the actor's eyes upon him. Suddenly Fleming threw up an arm in a rather overdone dramatic movement. "It's no use! Get out! Get out! I can't stand it any longer. Get out!"

"I'll be in the office, Mr. Fleming."

Joshua left quickly, fearful that Fleming would change his mind and order him out of the theater. He would have gone without question, but still he wanted to remain.

HE WENT to the office and paced its narrow confines. Things were bad—very bad. Something was radically wrong with Richard Fleming and it wasn't drink. There had been no whiskey on his breath there in the dressing room.

"I wish there was something I could do," Joshua muttered. "Some little thing at least."

Soon there was something, inexplicable though it was. Josh heard the roar of Fleming's voice, calling. The words thundered into the rotunda and Joshua rushed to the auditorium to find Fleming standing alone on the stage in front of the curtain.

"Josh! Josh! I want you!"

"I'm here, Mr. Fleming."

"Bring me some tools. I want a hammer—some nails—a screw-driver."

"Right away." Joshua was mystified and gratified at the same time. Here at least was relief from idleness. He brought the carpenter's box from backstage. Richard Fleming jerked it from his hand.

"Can I help you?" Joshua asked.

"No—no! Go back where you came from. I'll call if you're needed.

An hour passed before the booming voice came again to the office where Joshua waited.

"Paint—I want some paint and a brush, Josh. Gray paint, and soon the deed will be done!"

Again, Fleming went down into the bastions of the Lyceum Theater. Again Josh waited. Then Fleming's voice from another location. Josh rushed up the stairs to find his employer in the top balcony. Standing in the ladder-like aisle, Fleming was swaying from the effects of the brandy; but his voice did not falter. There was no impediment of speech.

"I have here a Bible, Josh. A copy of the Holy Bible! Do you know what a Bible is for, Josh?"

"Of course I do, Mr. Fleming. I—"

"That's good! That's excellent. Josh—you will find some changes have been made in the basement. That room of mine—the private room in corridor C—"

"You mean the one you keep locked? Where nobody goes in?"

"It is no more, Josh! Finished! Done with! My magnificent gesture of defiance. I defy them, Josh, and that is my symbol!"

"You mean you nailed it shut?"

"And painted it over. It is part of the wall now. That's why I brought this Bible. You must swear an oath!"

"Sure, Mr. Fleming."

"That you will forget the room ever existed. You will erase it from your memory! You will consign it to oblivion! Upon your sacred oath, you will tell no living soul it ever existed."

"Sure, Mr. Fleming. If that's the way you want it."

"Swear! Give your oath!"

"Sure."

* * * *

"SO THAT'S what I did, Paul," Joshua Blent told the third-generation Fleming who sat beside him in the dark, run-down theater. "I swore on the Bible and then went back to the office. For an hour, your grandpa ranted and raved on the balcony. I can't remember half what he said, but there was a lot about taking back his immortal soul, about shaking off the bonds of servitude."

Joshua was silent for a long minute. "Then it happened," he said.

"What happened?"

"I went back to the balcony figuring on trying to get Richard to come down from there. It was a dangerous place to stamp around the way he was doing."

"Just a minute, Josh, before you go on. At that time—on that night you're telling me about—Grandfather was insane, wasn't he? He had to be insane!"

"Joshua Blent's word ain't good for much on things like that, son. I ain't no doctor. But—"

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Paul reached over and pressed his hand. "I understand. And I think no man ever had a more loyal emp—a more loyal friend."

"Thank you, son, and now I'll finish it up. When I got there, he was standing by the railing waving his arms. A minute later he was dead. I killed him."

"You killed him!"

"Yeah. I told you yesterday I'd only seen one rat in the Lyceum—remember? It was the rat that startled your grandpa there in the balcony—made him lose his balance and fall. I saw it skoot under a seat after it brushed against his legs. He went clear to the main floor. Killed him instantly."

"But you said it was you yourself who—"

"Keeping this place clear of vermin was my responsibility. I didn't do my job, or the rat wouldn't have been there."

"That's absurd, Josh. You mean you've gone through all these years suffering—feeling that it was your fault?"

The old man smiled thinly. "It was my fault. You know, son, when a man gets old he's inclined to excuse himself. There's times—thinking about that night—that I convince myself it was something else—not a rat. It's a defense mechanism, I guess they call it. Tell yourself a lie and make yourself believe it. That's why I talked like I did yesterday, I guess. Sure—there's rats in the Lyceum, but not very many since that night, I can tell you."

PAUL'S FIRST reaction was one of impatience with such a far-fetched facet of loyalty. He almost said as much, then caught himself, realizing how serious a thing this was to the bewildered Joshua Blent.

"I'm sorry I mentioned the rats in the basement," Paul said gently. "I didn't know—"

"It's all right, son."

"Why did you tell me all this, Josh?"

The aged caretaker shrugged. "I figured you should know what you're up against. Besides, you'd have gone into that room anyhow—out of curiosity, or I miss my guess."

"You've never been in there yourself?"

"No."

"And you have no idea what the room contains?"

"No idea at all. Your grandpa kept it locked all the time."

"And it hasn't been opened since he died?"

"It's been opened."

"By whom?"

"Your dad opened it up. Him and your mother—"

"Does anybody want a cup of coffee?"

Both men were startled. They turned sharply to see Marcy standing beside them. Paul said, "Hey—I'm going to put a bell around your neck."

Marcy's laugh bubbled. "Here—take this before it gets cold."

Paul got up from his seat. "I don't think I want any coffee. There's something I've got to do."

"What, darling?"

"Open a door."

"That's silly. No door in the world can be more important than your wife. And darling—I want to go home."

"But I'm curious to find out—"

Marcy stepped close to him. "—some things about your bride? And high time, too." She bent over and kissed him. "I've got a perfectly normal and healthy curiosity myself."

Paul laughed. "You make marriage sound positively indecent, angel."

"But not as attractive as opening doors?"

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"Okay. The door can wait 'til tomorrow. So long, Josh. See you later."

MARCY WORE a sky-blue negligee and had her hair combed straight back to a ribbon at the nape of her neck. It made her look very girlish. She leaned across the small breakfast table and said, "Darling, do you remember what I told you before we were married—that you really knew very little about me?"

Paul smiled. "But I'm learning fast."

"Now you're going to learn faster. Paul—I've written a play."

"You've done what?"

"Don't look so surprised. After all, I went to college. I studied dramatics."

"It isn't that I doubt your ability, angel. It's just that you surprise me."

"And another thing—remember when I asked you what you were going to do with the Lyceum? You said good plays were hard to find."

"I understand they are."

"Then you're lucky to have mine. You won't have to look any further."

Paul put down his coffee cup and laughed. "Wait a minute! Not so fast. How do I know it's any good?"

A mock pout on Marcy's red lips. "I'm surprised at you. I expected you to be a little biased in my favor, at least."

"I am. That's what I'm afraid of. I couldn't take an objective view of it."

Marcy came around the table and sat down in his lap. She ran her fingers through his hair, but her manner had lost its lightness.

"Seriously, Paul, you won't have to worry about that. It is good. Don't ask me how I know. I just do know—that's all. It's a great play."

There was continued banter in Paul's tone. "Do I have to buy it before I read it?"

"Of course not, darling. That will be your morning's work. Wait. I'll get the manuscript."

Marcy was off toward the bedroom. "What's the name of it?" Paul asked.

She turned. "*The Shining Mountain*. It's a story of the Norsemen and their gods—the Vikings and the gods they prayed to. It's laid years and years before Columbus discovered America, and there are parts in it for both of us."

Paul finished his coffee before Marcy returned and laid a bulky manuscript on the table. "There it is, darling. And you're to read it before you shave. Right now. There's plenty of coffee in the pot and I'll run along so you won't be disturbed."

"Where are you going?"

"Shopping, darling. I'll bet I'm the only girl in the world to do her shopping after marriage rather than before."

MARCY DISAPPEARED into the bedroom and Paul leafed idly through the pages of the script. It had the professional touch to it; the look of having been turned out by an expert at such things. Paul went back to the first page and began reading.

A short time later, Marcy came from the bedroom dressed for the street. Paul looked up, a slight frown on his face. "Marcy—did you really write this?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I—well, I don't quite know—"

"Is it because you don't think I have the ability to write a play?"

"Of course not. But I didn't have the least idea you were even interested in writing. And now—out of a clear sky—you hand me a complete three-act play."

"How do you like it?"

"I don't know yet, but I can tell it's no amateur attempt."

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"I think you'll find it good."

"There's another point. Possibly I wouldn't know a good play if I saw it—on paper, that is. I don't know the first thing about drama."

"That's what they said about your grandfather—and your father."

Paul looked up swiftly. "Then you did this yourself—without help?"

Marcy colored slightly and Paul regretted his sudden question. Any anger Marcy showed would be justified.

But Marcy did not register anger. She bit her lip and glanced down at the floor as though she could not meet his direct gaze. Then she said, "Yes. I wrote it myself. No one else had anything to do with it. Does that satisfy you?"

"Marcy! Please. I'm sorry. It's just—"

"I know—the surprise. Read it. I'll be back in time for lunch."

Marcy bent over and kissed him swiftly. Then she went out without a backward glance. Paul stared at the door for a long time, his face blank of all expression. But there was one clear thought in his mind: It's true. I know very little about the girl I married.

He poured another cup of coffee, lit a cigarette, and settled back to read.

TWO HOURS later the coffee sat cold—untouched; the cigarette a half-burned stub in the ash tray. He laid the script down and rubbed his eyes. He put his elbows on the table and stared down at the page before him.

The Shining Mountain. And it was good. In fact, Paul had a definite feeling that it was great. He was no critic. He knew none of the rules. But the reading had given him the same thrill he got from watching a great piece of drama.

And Marcy did this, he told himself. My wife has talent. I'm a lucky guy.

He got to his feet and went into the bathroom. He set the shower, stripped off his pajamas; and as the sharp water struck his skin, he thought of—or tried to remember—names he had heard.

William Skinner. Beyond doubt a great director. But he was famous for comedies. *The Shining Mountain* was far from that. Sam Hammond? Probably more his type. Paul shaved, dressed, and looked up Hammond's address in the telephone book.

Then he sat down and wrote a short note, enclosed it with the script, and phoned for a messenger.

Twenty minutes later, he was walking down the street toward the Lyceum. There were several trains of thought milling about in his mind; but paramount was a vague, pleasant glow of anticipation. It would be good to produce a play; nice to read in the papers of Paul Fleming, who was following the tradition of his family by reopening the Lyceum; nice to see Marcy's name in lights as the author of a hit. And the play was good. He knew it. If Hammond refused to direct it, he could get someone else.

As to he and Marcy acting in it—that was simply too fantastic to be considered. Paul smiled at the absurdity of it. Then he was in front of the Lyceum, walking inside, seeking out Joshua Blent.

"There was something you were telling me yesterday when Marcy came in," Paul said. "About my father opening the room in the basement. You didn't tell him about it?"

"No. And he didn't ask me. He just started going down there—sometimes with your mother—sometimes alone. I slipped down once and found the door back on its hinges. There was a padlock on it."

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"Then, before he died—he nailed it up again."

"That's right."

"What were the circumstances?"

Joshua sighed. "I'm doing a lot of talking lately—too much for an old codger. But sit down and I'll try and recollect that night—"

* * * *

IT WAS snowing. Up and down the street in front of the Lyceum, late evening crowds plowed by through the watery slush on the sidewalks.

Joshua Blent stood in the outer lobby, looking out through the closed glass doors. He was sad, his mood one of gloom. *The Laughing Buccaneer* had closed the previous week due to the sudden and violent illness of the star and author, David Fleming. It had been impossible to carry on without Fleming because the public had stopped buying tickets. They did not want to see an understudy in the lead role.

So the Lyceum was dark and deserted, with Joshua Blent all alone in the hazy half-light under the darkened electric signs. And Joshua had an added reason for depression. Things were bad. The decline of David Fleming, both mentally and physically, was an appalling thing; a bewildering insidious thing that brought back to Joshua the earlier days when Richard Fleming had gone downhill in the same swift, mysterious fashion. It was uncanny—eerie somehow—to see a son follow in the disastrous footsteps of an illustrious father.

"It's like one of those curses you read about in stories," Joshua muttered. "A curse that runs in a family and cuts them down one by one."

Joshua's attention was suddenly arrested by a figure which disengaged itself from the passing throng and moved in toward the entrance to the theater. The figure was wrapped in a black great-coat, the collar of which was high. A black hat was pulled low. The man staggered as he walked.

A drunk, Joshua thought with annoyance. Then the man raised a fist to pound on the glass and Joshua sprang forward.

"Mr. Fleming! You shouldn't be out like this! You're supposed to be home in bed."

David Fleming staggered in out of the night. Joshua could see his eyes burning under the brim of the black hat; could almost feel the fever raging in the man.

"Get out, Joshua! Go away and leave me alone. I have an appointment with a devil to buy back my soul! We must be undisturbed!"

A slight chill went through Joshua Blent. Up out of the dead years came another voice; the thundering tones of Richard Fleming: *"Tonight I must regain my immortal soul. I will break these horrible bonds of servitude!"*

"We must be undisturbed, I tell you!" Then, apparently forgetting Joshua Blent, David Fleming flung away his hat and went on into the theater.

Joshua stood undecided for some time. Then, instead of leaving as ordered, he slipped through the inner foyer into the darkened auditorium. Crouching low in a rear seat, he waited, sorely bewildered and unhappy.

FOR A TIME, there was silence. Then the stage lights flared on, and a moment later David Fleming strode out onto the stage.

He struck an heroic pose to turn slowly and face the emptiness on all sides of him. Then he flung up his arms and roared, "Come out, you invisible little friends. Come out and face me! Let me see my tormenters eye to eye! This is the end! The end, I tell you! No longer will I be your creature! My ability is my own and a proven thing!"

The ringing of David Fleming's words died into faint echoes and was gone. Then the tension, the silent agony of the scene, played magic tricks upon Joshua Blent because, as he crouched in his seat, there came other sounds—first a faint, stifled giggle; then the amused chucklings as from the fairy throat of an evil leprechaun. They were tiny sounds, reminiscent of tiny things; small of timbre and of volume. Yet, the masterly construction of the Lyceum picked them up and carried them to the furthest reaches of the auditorium. Small derisive sounds.

Joshua Blent shook his head like a groggy fighter and they were gone. He focused his eyes again on the stage to find that David Fleming had gone to his knees and was now sinking to the bare boards of the stage. Joshua sprang from his hiding place,

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ran to the office and feverishly clashed the receiver hook of the phone. When he had made his call he rushed to the stage and knelt down beside the stricken actor.

Fleming's eyes were closed; his breathing was labored; all the effects of continued drinking over the months were apparent.

He opened his eyes and stared up into Joshua's face. There was madness in those eyes, but for a moment they cleared. His voice was the scraping of dried husks. "Josh—good old Josh."

"Yes, Mr. Fleming. You'll be all right. They're coming for you."

Fleming laughed, then grimaced against the pain in his chest. "No, Josh—you're wrong. They came for me a long time ago."

* * * *

"THOSE WERE the last words he ever spoke, I think. They took him to the hospital, but they said he went into a comma and never recovered consciousness."

Joshua Blent's wheezy flow of words came to an end. He sat staring up at the empty stage as though he were seeing again that tragic scene of long ago.

"Just like grandpa," Paul Fleming breathed. "They must have been infected with some mad virus—some inherited thing."

"Seems so. And now, just one more point—about that room downstairs. I went down there a few days later and found it all boarded up again—just like your grandpa left it."

Paul got to his feet. "Well, at least we can clear up that mystery. Get a hammer and crow-bar, Josh. We'll have a look in that room."

Faintly, from back in the foyer, came the ringing of a telephone. "I'll see who that is first," Josh said.

"You go ahead. I'm going down into the basement."

Josh creaked up the aisle while Paul crossed the pit to the stage and got tools from the box in the wings. Equipped with a flashlight, he followed the route into the basement that Marcy had previously shown him. In corridor C, he propped the flash on the floor so that it focused upon the mysterious section of wall.

He found the faint outline of the nailed-up door and used one point of his crow-bar until he'd broken a small opening. The plank split and he applied the bar to another point. This brought away a complete board, giving him good leverage. He applied his weight until the squeak of tortured nails echoed through the corridor and the door swung out on rusty hinges.

Slowly, Paul laid the crow-bar on the floor and picked up the flashlight. He moved forward through the doorway like a man walking in a dark graveyard after nightfall.

Inside, he found two chairs—nothing more.

He stared dully at the chairs, placed side by side at one end of the square room. He glanced upward toward the low cement ceiling. Disappointment was clearly etched in his face.

Then, every instinct screaming sudden panic, Paul whirled. He could not see clearly, but his impression was that a rat had scurried by close behind him. He drove out a foot in unconscious reflex. But only to have the flash knocked from his hand by another small, rustling entity entirely unidentifiable. The flashlight rang against the cement wall and either snapped off or was broken.

Paul stood in complete darkness, every pore tightened as from sudden chill.

CHAPTER II

The Success-Makers

"STAND perfectly still, Mr. Fleming. You are in no immediate

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danger. In fact, this is your day of great good fortune. But stand perfectly still nonetheless."

The voice, to Paul Fleming, was reminiscent of something. It was definable, yet the definition eluded him.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

A small chuckle, and Paul realized that was the key—small. The voice was cultured, the pronunciation clear, but he could not visulize it as coming from other than a small throat. Not the voice of a child nor a midget, but of thin and fragile timbre; not substantial enough to belong to either an adult or a child.

"I asked you a question."

"So you did. My name is Putter. Rather amusing, don't you think? It implies a dolt, a rather stupid dodderer. But you'll find me far different."

"What are you doing here?"

"I've been waiting for you. It's my pleasant duty to inform you that you have been chosen."

Paul took a step forward. "If I could just get my hands on you..."

"I assure you that's impossible. I can move much faster than you. The comparison is somewhat like an ocean liner and a speed boat."

"What's the game? Is this a hold-up? Do you want money?"

Again the chuckle as though the invisible one were contemplating an absurdity. "You are most inquisitive, Mr. Fleming. But that's natural. Entirely so. As I said before, I am here to inform you that you have been chosen."

"Chosen for what?"

"For greatness, of course."

"Why do you crouch in the dark? Why don't you come out and show yourself?"

The owner of the squeaking voice was enjoying himself. He chuckled again and the sound was obviously masculine. "In answer to your first question—I am not crouching. I am standing here at my full height. As to the second: this method of introduction has proven the best one. You see—to hurl a man full force into a new situation is not—"

"I think it's some stupid trick. Is there a microphone and a loudspeaker of some sort in this room?"

"The room is entirely bare except for two chairs, as you should have seen for yourself, Mr. Fleming. There is no one here but you and I. You are indeed a fortunate man." An audible sigh. "Very fortunate."

"You told me to stand still. Have you a weapon of some sort?"

"Yes, I do have a weapon, but I have no intention of using it. There is no need for violence. In fact, you are entirely free to leave now. I've introduced myself and we've broken the ice, so to speak. I want you to go home and sleep on it. Then come back tomorrow and we'll turn on the light."

"We'll turn on the light a lot quicker than that. As soon as I come back with the police."

THE VOICE was completely unruffled. "No, Mr. Fleming. You will not call the police. You will go home and spend a very uncomfortable night. Then you will return as I have ordered."

Regardless of Paul's indignation over these highhanded tactics, he could not forbear complete amazement at his invisible director's aura of authority.

"Do you seriously think," Paul said, "that I will obey these absurd orders? What are you? A madman of some sort?"

Again the chuckle. Then a philosophical reminiscence: "It is invariably interesting; their many and colorful reactions when they are chosen. Some faint dead away. Others, the

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more stolid ones, are quickly ready to talk business—eager for any advantage. The unbelievers, I think, are the most intelligent, however. And the most honest. I would rather take one who screams in indignation than one who exhibits crafty and guileful tendencies from the beginning."

Paul had located the flashlight. It was a couple of steps away, lying against the wall. As the squeaky voice philosophized, Paul tensed his muscles. He dived for the light as a child dives for a dropped penny.

The flash was not broken. Paul thumbed the switch and there was a beam of sane, yellow light. With a feeling of triumph, he cut it back and forth around the room, backing toward the door as he did so.

The voice was silent now. The room was silent. And to Paul, it seemed the whole wide world was silent—tense—waiting to leap at his throat.

Now the light revealed an electric switch in the wall just next to the door. Reaching out with his free hand, Paul snapped it; a naked bulb blazed forth from the center of the low ceiling; white merciless light, calculated to dissolve shadows and mad, bodiless entities.

This done, Paul stood tense, trembling, in the doorway to a very ordinary, long-unused room. The walls were of rough cement; the flooring consisted of rough, uneven boards; the two straight-backed chairs were dusty and forlorn looking.

And there seemed to be no place from whence could come a squeaky arrogant voice.

Paul's knees trembled from the reaction as he backed from the entrance and slammed the door. The catch broken, it swung lazily outward again, but Paul was already moving up the corridor toward the sanity of the stage and the auditorium. Safe on the upper level, he dropped into a seat close to the orchestra pit and mopped his face with a linen handkerchief. He was weak, his heart fluttering as though from a siege of sickness, his mind a pitching chaos.

SO IT WAS true! There was a madness in the Fleming family which had been passed down from father to son. His grandfather had died in some sort of self-induced violence; his father had taken it up in turn. Now, from his own mind had come signs of the insanity virus working vigorously on the tissues of his brain.

It must have been the same with them, Paul thought. Richard Fleming had gone down shouting defiance to imaginary creatures that had usurped his immortal soul. Then David Fleming—coming sick and tottering to the empty Lyceum for a last valiant joust with the creatures he carried in his own mind.

That room—that bleak, empty room in the basement. How did it fit into the terrible picture? Some sort of a symbol, no doubt; a battleground fixed in sick minds as a place where the fight had been lost.

Sick at heart, weary and terrorized of mind, Paul walked up the aisle toward the exit. He hoped he would not meet Joshua Blent or anyone else.

But this hope came to nothing as he heard Joshua's voice calling from the office door: "Paul—there's a man waiting on the phone. He's been waiting quite a while."

"What man?"

"Says his name is Sam Hammond. He's a pretty patient guy."

Paul walked into the office and picked up the phone.

"Hello."

"Hello, Fleming. This is Hammond. Called you as soon as I finished reading it. It's terrific, man—terrific."

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"What are you talking about?"

Hammond hesitated. "Maybe I've got the wrong man. Someone sent me a play this morning. The note was signed Paul Fleming."

"Oh, yes—yes. I sent it to you."

"This Marcy Lynn—who in heaven's name is she? Why haven't I heard of her before?"

"*The Shining Mountain* is her first attempt."

"Some guys have all the luck. Where did you find her? Where's she been hiding?"

"She's my wife."

"You lucky dog."

Now, some of the enthusiasm went out of Hammond's voice. "Of course I could be wrong, Fleming. I think the thing is absolutely terrific, but I could be wrong. All I can give you is my honest opinion and that's this: I don't think you can go wrong producing it." There was a period of silence, after which Hammond said, "That's what you plan to do, isn't it?"

"I—I don't know. Some things have come up."

"Money?"

"No. That wouldn't be a problem."

"If you're short of cash, I can raise fifty thousand in twenty-four hours on the strength of this script."

"No, I have plenty of money."

Hammond sensed a possibility. "Look, Fleming. Maybe you don't care about the stage—maybe you don't want to get your feet wet. Now, I've been wanting to produce a play for a long time. Produce and direct—Fleming! Fleming—are you there?"

PAUL WALKED blindly down the street. He ignored the polite greeting from the doorman of his building, went inside and found the automatic elevator waiting. He rode to the fifth floor and unlocked the door to his apartment without being conscious of so doing.

Marcy's voice brought him partially from his dark reverie: "Darling, I've been waiting. I called the theater, but I got a busy signal."

"I was talking."

"I made some coffee. Or would you like a drink?"

"I was talking to Sam Hammond."

Marcy's eyes widened. "Hammond! The director?"

"Yes."

"Not about *The Shining Mountain!*"

"Yes. I sent it to him. He likes it."

Marcy threw her arms around his neck. "Oh darling! Paul! Isn't it wonderful?"

Paul pushed her backward, gently, to the lounge. He sat down beside her. "Marcy. Something's happened. Something terrible you mustn't be involved in. We must have our marriage annulled."

"Paul! What are you saying?"

"Marcy, I'm going mad. I've inherited the Fleming insanity. You must go away and not see me again."

The change in Marcy was like some manner of magic. The enthusiasm vanished. She reverted instantly to a sober, thoughtful young woman. She placed a hand against Paul's cheek, turned his head and looked into his eyes. "Paul—you went into that locked room, didn't you?"

"Yes. But how did you know about it? I don't remember mentioning it to you?"

In a quick surge of warmth, Marcy drew his head against her breast. "My poor darling! I knew you'd take it hard. But it isn't what you think. You aren't mad. You've just paid the first price of greatness. But now the worst is over."

"Marcy! I don't understand!"

"Of course you don't. Thank heaven I'm here to soften the blow—to make it easier for you."

Paul smiled, feeling he understood.

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"You're very sweet and loyal, darling, but you don't know what happened. When a man starts hearing voices—"

"I know exactly what happened. You met Putter."

"Are we both crazy?"

"Paul! We've been chosen! We are both marked for greatness! Can't you understand?"

"I only understand that I heard a voice that had to come out of my own mind. There was no one there, Marcy, down in that room. But this voice spoke to me!"

"There was someone there, Paul."

"Then who was it? What kind of a trick—"

"I'll try to explain it, Paul. I'm sure Putter wants me to. He's mean and he likes to hurt us, just as they all do, but he certainly expects me to help you as much as I can."

PAUL WAS staring at her. "It's amazing. How could two insane people find each other so unerringly. How could they meet—fall in love—marry—"

"Stop it, Paul! I want you to quit that line of thinking. I'm going to explain this thing, but you mustn't set up barriers in your mind against me because what I'm going to tell you is the truth, darling, and you must keep an open mind. You will be skeptical, of course—that I expect—but you must listen."

Paul slumped back on the lounge, a weak smile on his face. "I'll listen, Marcy. What else is there to do? It's either that or call the authorities and give ourselves up while we're still able to. I'll listen."

Marcy paced the floor for a few moments, her forehead furrowed from deep thought. It was as though she were carefully choosing words. Then she sat down beside Paul with a slight laugh.

"Darling, it's a little as though I were a mother and you a child and I were telling you the facts of life—revealing mysteries. That's entirely true because these are some facts of life—the things I'm going to tell you—facts that very few people ever hear about."

"Don't hedge, Marcy. Don't beat around the bush. If you have a point, come to it."

"I'll do my best, but it isn't simple. Maybe I'd better start with Putter—the man who spoke to you."

"Start somewhere."

"Putter is one of the little people, but don't ever use that term in their presence. They prefer to be known as *tarmuts*. That's their racial name. And Paul—no one on earth, in any line of endeavor, ever got anywhere without the help of a *tarmut*."

"That sounds like utter nonsense. You sure you aren't merely keeping me interested until you can call the boys in the white coats?"

"Paul, don't think or talk like that. Listen—that play I wrote—you asked me if I did it myself. Well—I did, as much so as anyone ever does a great thing themselves."

"What on earth are you trying to—"

"But Paul—*no one since the world began ever did a great thing without the help of a tarmut.* But only the people they help—the select few through which they manifest their superior abilities—know they exist."

"Pixies."

"No darling. Not pixies nor leprechauns nor elves nor anything else but *tarmuts* themselves. All those names have a single, but distorted, basis of fact. You see, when the *tarmuts* choose people through which to manifest ability, they sometimes make mistakes. Legends of these other little entities sprang up through the centuries from people whom *tarmuts* approached and found unworthy of greatness."

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PAUL RUBBED his fingers over the cushion of the lounge. "That's real," he said. He reached out and touched Marcy's face, her hair. "You're real too, I think."

"And the *tarmuts* are just as real, Paul. At first, it will seem entirely unreal—that I grant. Any great revealed mystery seems unreal to the neophyte."

"What big words. Maybe you'd better tell me how you met the—the what did you call them?"

"*Tarmuts*. Yes, of course I'll tell you. It happened at the Lyceum. I—"

"What is the Lyceum? A headquarters for these *tarmuts*? Is that where they hang out?"

"Not necessarily. They live in their own world. Of necessity, that must be underneath ours. I don't know where they come from nor where they go, but that isn't important. I only know they are never seen unless they wish to be. They are a proud, embittered race of beings. They hate us, Paul. They hold us in contempt and they find great joy in hurting us."

"Then why do they make us great?"

"Because it is the only satisfactory way they can manifest their power. Through greater size and strength, we have the world they would like to have. We go about in the world they yearn for, but in which they can never be seen because we would consider them freaks—that is, the great unthinking mass of us. But they know things about us that we don't know ourselves, the most important of which is this: no human being has the ability in himself to rise above a certain level of mediocrity in any field of endeavor. The *tarmuts* sneer at our stupidity, our lack of talent and skill, our level of intelligence so far below theirs."

"If they're smarter than we are, why don't they rise up and wipe us out? That is, if they hate us so much."

"Because the level of our abilities, while far below theirs, coupled with our superior size and strength, is still high enough to defeat them. In any war of elimination, we would wipe them out like rats once our fury was aroused."

"Then let's wipe them out."

"Paul—please be serious."

"I was never more serious in my life."

"Then I think you'll change your mind when you know all the facts."

"Go on. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"So the *tarmuts* are trapped in their own world with no place to manifest their talents except in ours, where they can never appear. And through us—whom they hate."

"They must envy us then as well as hate us."

"They do, and the only channel left to them through which they can assert themselves is a vicarious one. They choose persons from our world and literally drive them to success. Then they look upon this success as their own. Also, they achieve a hold over us—over those they've put on top—and thus, in a great measure, control our world—one in which they can never move."

Paul passed a weary hand across his brow. "You were going to tell me how you got tangled up with these *tarmuts*."

"Yes. I'd always wanted to do something great in literature—write a great novel or a play which would become a classic. I lacked the ability, but I had the urge. That in itself is the principal weapon the *tarmuts* hold over our heads; our fanatical desire for fame. The fantastic mania to do something great so we will be envied by others, or earn a great deal of money, or make our names undying. For success in our chosen field, we will put up with their insults, their arrogance. In return for the success they give us, we allow them to treat us like the

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stupid animals they consider us to be."

Paul frowned sharply at his new wife. When he spoke, it was with a brusqueness which could only be excused by the sudden pressure of revelation: "You keep talking in theory, in generalities. You were going to tell me exactly how you met these *tarmuts*."

"Yes," Marcy said. "It happened over six months ago. I'd returned to the Lyceum quite late in the afternoon—"

* * * *

IT WAS about five o'clock when Marcy returned to the Lyceum. She had come in during the morning to check and enter the invoices Joshua had laid out on the desk for her. Then she'd returned to her apartment to continue work on the play she was writing. But a mood of discouragement came over her at thoughts of the play.

Finally, she got up from her ledgers in Blent's office and fled to the sanctuary of the dark, silent auditorium. With great despair she crossed the orchestra pit ramp and walked across the stage. A single unshaded bulb glowed in one corner of the stage over a small table and two chairs. Marcy dropped into a chair and rested her elbows on the table.

"You're a fool, Marcy Lynn," she told herself. "What ever made you think you could write a play? What inordinate conceit prompted you to go out and buy a ream of typewriter paper?"

"Certainly you're a fool," a voice answered.

Marcy gasped. She looked around, thinking that Joshua Blent had also returned to the Lyceum for something he'd forgotten.

But the voice obviously wasn't that of Blent. It was thin, piping—a petulant squeaking as of an irritated door hinge.

"Where—who are you?"

There was a scraping sound and a small figure jumped nimbly from the seat of the other chair up onto the table. Marcy gasped. The sudden jerk of sheer amazement caused images to blur before her eyes. The stage spun mistily. Then her eyes cleared to stare with rigidity at the small figure on the table.

He was the perfect replica—in miniature—of the human male. Perfect even to the well tailored suit, the red necktie, and the well shined shoes. To the crown of the gray fedora he wore, the little creature did not exceed seven inches in height. He was the perfect picture of the bored, cynical cosmopolitan. But even more. There was bitterness in his tiny, handsome face, an attitude of complete contempt in the eyes that surveyed Marcy.

"I wonder if we haven't had enough of this schoolgirl surprise. Let's not be any more stupid than God contemplated our being."

"Please—I don't—"

"Of course you don't. You haven't enough imagination to believe something even when you see it. What made you think you could write a decent play?"

"I—"

"You can't even retain command of your faculties under the shock of a mild surprise. God, what stupid animals you *gromats* are!"

"You mean . . ." Marcy drew quick fingers across her forehead. "You mean you really exist? You aren't a trick of some sort?"

"I am a *tarmut*. My name is Blatter. It's Putter's idea that you be given a certain amount of success in the field you've chosen. Personally I'm against it, but Putter persuaded me as usual."

MARCY GRIPPED hard on the edges of the table. Then one of her hands moved slowly forward. "Do you mind if I touch you?"

Blatter did not move. He stood on tiny spread legs, arms on his hips in a gesture of defiance. "If you dare to lay a finger on me, I'll kill you. Let that be understood from the beginning. You'll keep your filthy hands to yourself."

The little creature moved backward a pace and took in Marcy's comparative bulk. His lip curled. "I don't know what Putter could have been thinking of. You have about as much merit as a lamp post. Why do you want to write a play? Let's see if you have enough intelligence to give even one coherent reason. Go on—tell me! Why are you trying to write a play?"

Even though she felt herself to be at least momentarily beyond the boundaries of sanity, Marcy felt a strange compelling force about this small creature who called

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himself Blatter. She heard herself speaking: "Because I—I—"

"Stop stumbling like a half-wit. If there's anything that annoys me, it's bumbling speech. Talk up!"

"Because I feel that I have something to say." In Marcy's mind there were other words: This is beyond all comprehension. I'm sitting here talking to someone who doesn't exist—who can't possibly exist. Yet, there he stands!

The small, sharp voice came again—harsh—steeped in bitterness: "There has never been one of your kind—not a single one in your entire history who has ever had anything worthwhile to say. Understand that, and remember it."

"But there have been great things said—and written."

"Not by you or your kind!" Blatter began showing all the symptoms of apoplexy. "Only by us, the *tarmuts*. We put the words in your mouth! It is our brains that created your literature, your arts, your entire civilization. Remember that, too."

A sudden terror swept over Marcy. "Why don't you go away? Leave me alone. I've done nothing to you." Marcy heard her own words, but they seemed not to come from her. It was all too grotesque.

Blatter sneered anew. "Then it was all talk. All wind and hot air. You wanted to write a play, but when the opportunity comes along you turn yellow. It's disgusting."

"What—what do you know about writing plays?"

"Very little perhaps, but of the four hits running on Broadway today, three were done by me. The other, a musical, was written by Pratter, a friend of mine."

A LITTLE spirit had seeped back into Marcy. "That's absurd!" The authors of those plays are well known. They—"

"—are fools. The same brand as you." Blatter straightened and sighed as from the depths of boredom. "I don't know why Putter chose you, but he must have had a reason. You'll certainly be the stupidest kind of material to work with." Here he again leaned forward, his tiny eyes slitted. "But don't think I'm going to make it easy for you. You're a particularly detestable type of clay I hate to handle, so I'm not going to give you a hit play on a silver platter. You're going to work, do you understand? You're going to sweat and grind and work. I'm going to do my best to break you down, to smash you."

Marcy sat in terrified silence. Blatter watched her and his naked contempt seemed to deepen. "Of course, I'll have to be fair about it; fair to this extent. If you can stand up under the punishment you're going to get, you'll come out with a play; a hot play that will run for years."

"I've always wanted to write—I'm sincere about that."

"You and your kind have never drawn a sincere breath. But enough of that. There is a small room at the end of corridor D down in the basement. We can work there without being disturbed. Bring your typewriter down there tomorrow, and also what you have written. I'll spend a little time explaining who we *tarmuts* are, and then we'll get to work."

Marcy got stiffly to her feet, the shrill voice still ringing in her ears.

"Understand—I could write the play we're going to do in not more than three hours. I could put it down perfect—word for word—first draft. But I won't do it! I'm going to sweat it out of you." The little man leaned far back and laughed. "A drop of sweat for each word."

Marcy backed away from the table.

"Go on home now," Blatter said. "And understand this too: I don't care whether you ever come back or not. Personally, I'm sick of the sight of you. It is all Putter's idea, not mine. I've got three plays on Broadway now. Why should I bother with any more of you morons?"

Marcy fled across the ramp and out of the theater. She moved blindly through the early evening crowds until she found herself blocks from the theater. The lighted window of a small restaurant loomed. She entered, ordered without thought and sat staring at her coffee cup.

I've got to get a grip on myself, she thought. I mustn't let this thing beat me. I've got to think. I've got to find some order in this mental chaos. I need an anchor—a point to think from.

Marcy's memory offered this, something Blatter had said: *"—of the four hits running on Broadway today, three were done by me."*

Of course. A clue toward the sane method of approach. Marcy went to the phone booth and thumbed through the telephone book. St. John—Lee St. John. 18 Demming

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Place. Marcy went out of the restaurant and got into a cab.

THE BUTTON was of ivory, set in a gold plated ring. Marcy pressed it; she stood back to wait, wondering if she'd be successful. After all, a playwright such as Lee St. John—shot into prominence almost overnight with a hit like *Pacific Warrior*—he probably had three butlers and two private secretaries to protect him from the public.

She pressed the button again. Nothing happened. Then, as she was almost ready to leave, the door opened and a bleary eye peered out. The crack widened to accommodate two bleary eyes. Also a chin long unshaven and a mouth that opened into a vacuous grin.

"Hullo baby."

Marcy took an unconscious step backward. An arm reached out; an arm covered by the rumpled sleeve of a hundred-dollar dressing gown. "Don't go 'way. Don't leave poor old Lee all alone, baby. Want to talk to somebody like you. Somebody pretty."

Marcy was dumbfounded. Lee St. John drunk! His handsome, youthful face as portrayed in the publicity buildups was a far thing from the haunted visage in the doorway.

"I was hoping for a word with you, Mr. St. John—"

"You can have it, baby. Come in—come in and we'll rag about old school days when we were poor but honest. Remember?" St. John put a finger beside his nose in an elaborately drunken gesture. "Poor but honest, baby."

Still numbed, Marcy allowed herself to be drawn into the room. Lee St. John closed the door and became a swaying escort to conduct Marcy into a library with courtly gestures bordering on the absurd.

"What can I do for you, honey? Just ask old Lee. Anything."

"Are you all alone, Mr. Lee?"

The grin became crafty. "Yeah—Lee all by his 'ittle 'onesome. Chased 'em all out. Tired of 'em. Couldn't stand 'em anymore."

Marcy sat down, primly, on the edge of a chair. She looked helplessly about her, sorry now that she'd come.

Lee St. John stood swaying in the middle of the room. He was now relaxing his efforts toward correct articulation and his speech was fuzzy.

"Li'l drink, honey? Jus' a li'l snort with ol' Lee?"

"No—no thank you. Perhaps I shouldn't have bothered you."

St. John waved a generous hand and almost fell on his face. "Think nothing of it. Nothing at all. Ol' Lee likes pretty girls that come up to see the great writer. But he don't let many of 'em in cause most of 'em are—ugly." His grin widened. "Ugly as sin. Think I'll have li'l drink 'fya don't mind." He reeled toward a sideboard.

MIGHT AS well get into it, Marcy thought. "Mr. St. John, I came to ask you a question. You may think me impudent. You may even order me out."

"Not a chance, honey. As' me anything. Then a drink. Then maybe a li'l kiss, huh?"

Marcy strove to keep her voice firm. "Did you—yourself—write *Pacific Warrior?*"

St. John's hand froze in mid-air holding the half-tilted whiskey bottle.

Oh, this was idiotic! Marcy's toes curled in frustration. That wasn't the question she'd meant to ask. She'd come here fully intending to look Lee St. John straight in the eye and say: Did a little man seven inches tall write your play for you?

The question had seemed so appropriate—so logical—back in the restaurant. It would clear up all her problems. But she hadn't been able to force out the words.

St. John turned slowly. It seemed to Marcy he appeared suddenly less drunk, suddenly far more taut and miserable. But she couldn't be sure.

"You think I swiped it from somebody?"

"No—no, of course not. I came here for a purpose, but I'm afraid I offended you and bungled it badly."

The famous author had a drink in his hand. He stared dully at the liquor, then poured it automatically down his throat. "I don't get you, babe. I don't get you at all."

"Are you sure you don't? Did you ever hear of a—a man named Blatter?"

St. John's jaw sagged. Marcy felt a chill of elation. Then she remembered she'd seen lots of drunks with sagging jaws. St. John set down his empty glass. Did it carefully as though he expected it to splinter

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into many pieces right in his hand.

He staggered out of the library without further word.

Later, Marcy glanced at her watch. She was startled. At least fifteen minutes had gone by. She got up and went to the door. A hallway bisected the apartment.

"Mr. St. John."

There was no answer. Marcy moved down the hallway past several doors standing open on dark rooms. She found a white door, closed, with a streak of light along its bottom.

"Mr. St. John."

No answer.

Suddenly Marcy's face flamed. Standing in front of a closed door calling to an utter stranger! She turned and fled from the apartment, found a cab and sat huddled in one corner until she got to her own building.

Upstairs, she paced the floor for a long time. Finally, tired out and having arrived at no conclusion, she went to bed. But for long hours she lay awake, thoughts mulling about in her head.

As she began to get drowsy, she smiled to herself. What a beautiful apartment Lee St. John had! The gorgeous furnishings. All the things that fame and money could procure! Her smile deepened as she went to sleep.

* * * *

PAUL FLEMING asked, "This St. John—isn't he the writer who stirred up a nine day's wonder by committing suicide?"

Marcy nodded. "Yes. From what I could gather, he never came out of that room alive. It was in the papers next morning. He used a—a razor blade."

Paul got up from his chair and began pacing the room. "They said quick success and liquor and women did it."

"That may be true."

"But that isn't all of it. You still haven't told me about writing *The Shining Mountain.*"

"No, I haven't, darling. I'll tell you. I'll tell you all of it. The next morning I—"

* * * *

THE NEXT morning Marcy awoke with a sense of expectancy. Then she remembered and her spirits fell. It had all been a dream, of course. But even to visiting the great Lee St. John? Certainly. That had been the most ludicrous part of the dream.

Marcy made coffee, brought the morning paper from the hall and laid it open on the table. A glaring sub-head greeted her: AUTHOR OF "PACIFIC WARRIOR" SUICIDE. The news story read:

Lee St. John, ex—G. I., and noted author of the fabulous Broadway hit, "Pacific Warrior", ended his life early this morning. Some time during the quiet hours while the city slept, St. John entered his bathroom, locked the door, and cut his wrists with a razor blade. No motive is known for the suicide at this time. The body was found about 4 A. M. by friends of St. John who called at his apartment after a round of night clubs and prior to returning to their own homes. They became suspicious of the locked bathroom door, broke it down, and found St. John beyond aid. According to his friends, the noted author who had been drinking heavily for many weeks was afflicted by spells of despondency.

Marcy sat staring at her coffee cup. The fool! To throw away all that had been given him! The success—the adulation—the thousands and thousands of dollars heaped in his lap. Blatter was right! Human beings were fools!

Marcy finished her coffee, dressed quickly, and pushed a bulky manuscript into an envelope. This, together with her portable typewriter, was quite a load as she struggled downstairs and hailed a cab. But as she rolled through the Manhattan streets, she was thrilled to the point of physical sensation; a delicious warmth welled up from her toes.

I have been chosen.

The thought was like champagne. Out of all the city's millions she, Marcy Lynn, had been selected for greatness!

She paid off the driver on a side street and approached the theater through the alley, entering by the stage door and going directly to the sub-basement. She found the corridor, entered the pre-arranged room and snapped on the light.

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A TINY figure sat on one corner of a bare table dangling his legs over the side. He looked as though he had just come from a miniature bandbox. His shoes were shined, his trousers pressed to a razor-edge, his linen white and sparkling.

Also, he was in an evil mood. "Putter said you'd come," he growled. "I was hoping he would be wrong. I'd much rather go home and go to bed than listen to the drivel in that envelope."

Marcy laid the typewriter case on the table. This elicited another snarl from Blatter. "Careful, you lumbering dolt! Do you want to knock me off?"

"I'm sorry."

"That would help a lot if I broke a leg. Now, sit down in that chair by the wall and start reading. I'll see how much of it I can stand."

Marcy tiptoed to the wall, sat down carefully, and took out her script, Blatter eyeing her with cold hostility the while.

"What's your title?"

"I've called my play *Send Me No Roses*".

Blatter groaned. "Here we go again. Amateurs trying to be fancy pants." He got up and began pacing the table top. "Well? What's wrong? Are you tongue-tied? Start reading."

Ten minutes later he threw his hands into the air. "Stop it! Stop it! You're making me sick. Even the urge to write such stuff is a disgrace. Tear it up!"

"Tear it—up?"

"That's what I said."

"But I worked for almost a year—"

Blatter gritted his little teeth. "Do—as—I—say! Rip it straight across the middle, a dozen sheets at a time."

Numbed by his diminutive ferocity, Marcy went about ripping to pieces the efforts of a long weary year. When she was through, she looked up to see Blatter regarding her closely.

"That caused you a great deal of sorrow, didn't it?"

"I—I worked a long time."

Blatter grinned. "Excellent. I enjoyed it very much. That's another thing you louts don't know. It is the refined cruelties that are the most satisfying. Now you're going to work again. Eight hours a day—seven days a week. If you think you're going to have success handed to you—you're very much mistaken."

Tears welled up in Marcy's eyes. "Why do you hate me so much?"

Blatter sneered. "That's it. Grovel! Whine and bawl all over the place. Be even more disgusting than you are."

"I think you're despicable."

"Fine. We understand each other. Now we can get to work."

"But I can't work seven days a week. I must make a living."

"You can take care of your job here at the theater. That's all. We'll see that you're provided for. You're going to pay for success, you overgrown cow." Blatter grinned anew. "And I'm going to enjoy myself immensely."

* * * *

PAUL FLEMING was pacing up and down. He stopped and looked down at his wife.

"So you worked?"

Marcy nodded. "He drove me like the superintendent of a slave mart."

"How long did it take you to write *The Shining Mountain?*"

Marcy looked up, tiny sparks of fright in her eyes. "I didn't write it, really. I wrote four plays, sweated over them like a Turk. I lost weight." Marcy shuddered. "That little fiend literally wore it off of me. Then, every time I finished a play, he made me tear it up. He looked forward to those times."

Paul regarded her soberly. "You really wanted success, didn't you, angel?"

"Paul, that's one of the requirements, even though we can't achieve it without the help of the *tarmuts*. We must be willing to suffer for it."

"You said you didn't write *The Shining Mountain.*"

"I did—and I didn't. One day I came to the room and Blatter was very sullen. He said, 'Putter is getting impatient. He says the time is growing short, so I can't enjoy myself anymore.'

"That made me very happy. I said,

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'Then you mean possibly the next play I write—?'

"Blatter said, 'You stupid ass! You couldn't write a play in a thousand years! Get that through your thick head. None of your breed can do a great thing in literature, finance, construction or anything else without us. We built your world. Can't you understand that? We did it!'

"I was terribly frightened. I said, 'Then you've only been amusing yourself? I'm not going to—.'

"Blatter said, 'Sit down at your typewriter. Write what I tell you.'

"He began pacing up and down the table, scowling. He said, 'It's about time for a costume piece. We'll call it *The Shining Mountain* and we'll lay it in ancient Scandinavia.' He turned and leered at me. 'Do you know anything about ancient Scandinavia?'

"I shook my head and he laughed. 'Nor anything else,' he sneered. 'Now, get to work.'"

Marcy raised wide, awed eyes to Paul. "And darling—Blatter dictated *The Shining Mountain* as fast as I could type—hour after hour—without ever changing a word or going back for rewrite.

"When it was finished, I fainted from exhaustion. I came to, and Blatter was gone, but there was a fresh sheet of paper in my typewriter with a single line on it. Blatter had written: *Thank God I won't have to look at your stupid face any more.*

"I haven't seen him since."

Paul dropped wearily into a chair. "Let's go to bed. I'm exhausted too."

THEY ENTERED the theater through the alley so as not to run into Joshua Blent. Marcy led the way, sure of foot, down to corridor C.

"I still don't believe it," Paul said. "It's a gag; some kind of a practical joke."

Marcy turned and pressed close to him. "Darling, if you saw your name in lights on the marquee out there—Paul Fleming—blazing for all the world to see—would you consider that a gag?"

She was in his arms, her face turned up to his. In the semi-darkness he could see the light in her eyes, the brightness on her face, like a fever, like some unreasoning mania to drive ahead. Even the heart in the breast pressing against his own had seemingly caught the fever. Its rapid beat was an eagerness, a demand.

"Maybe they won't be there," Paul said, and there was a hopefulness in his voice.

"Putter will be there. It will be an occasion for him. He gave your father and your grandfather greatness in that room; he reflected himself through them. He'll be there."

"Wait a minute! That's crazy. Grandfather was here at the turn of the century. That would make Putter—"

"—very old. *Tarmuts* live a very long time, darling. They don't measure their lives in years. Putter is almost three hundred years old."

Suddenly Paul laughed. "The time has come, the Walrus said, to speak—"

Marcy gripped his hand. "Don't, Paul! Don't ever ridicule them. It's—dangerous. Laugh at them and they go crazy. You might be killed."

"Killed? By a little man seven inches high? Marcy—be serious."

"They have a way of killing people. It isn't done very often."

Her voice went to a whisper as they approached the broken door in corridor C. Paul reached around the door jamb and turned on the light.

AT FIRST he saw nothing—only the bare room; two chairs. Then,

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leaning negligently against the baseboard, he beheld a seven-inch figure clad in a miniature business suit. The figure was smoking a cigarette the size of half a toothpick. He drew on it and sent two tiny plumes of smoke from his nostrils.

"I'm Putter," he said, "and I hope we won't have to go through a lot of wide-eyed asininity before we get down to business. Your wife should have had the sense to condition you, or is that asking too much?"

When Marcy spoke it was as though she addressed at the very least a Supreme Court justice. There was reverence in her tone: "I felt you'd want me to do that. I'm glad it pleases you. Paul knows all about you."

"All about me? That's as silly a thing as I've heard in a long time."

"Well—about Blatter—and *The Shining Mountain.*"

"Oh, yes, Blatter." Putter looked with fresh contempt upon Marcy. "You certainly put him through a living hell. It was only from the goodness of his heart that he was able to see it through."

"I'm very grateful," Marcy said.

Putter turned his attention to Paul. "Are you ready to go to work?"

Paul dropped into a chair and sat regarding the diminutive Putter. "Were you responsible for Richard Fleming's success?"

The little eyes were cold. "He had no success in himself. His greatness was mine—all mine."

"And David Fleming?"

"Merely a repetition. Another piece of clay to mold."

"They both died horribly."

Putter shrugged. "A pair of weaklings basically. They were eager for the glory. Then they got ideas—exaggerated ideas of their own abilities. They were stupid."

"You expect me to sit here and take that?"

"You'll take far more before you're through."

"Like hell I will! I'll smash you."

Paul lunged forward, straight at the arrogant little figure. His hands closed as they would close on a doll. But they found only air. Putter's agility was an amazing thing. Paul raised his eyes to see the *tarmut* leaning against the far baseboard sneering at him.

MARCY SCREAMED, "Paul! Paul! You're going out of your mind! You don't know what you're doing. He'll kill you!"

Paul looked at her in consternation. "Are you bewitched? Are you seriously telling me this creature can hurt me?"

"He has a weapon—a small silver gun—"

"You'd die in twenty seconds if I chose to kill you," Putter squeaked. He drew a shining tube from his pocket. "We have a defense against anyone who threatens us. This is a blowpipe. All *tarmuts* carry one. I could blow a needle into your leg—a needle so small a microscope would be needed to find it. And the poison? Impossible to detect. More people have been listed as dying of heart failure—"

Paul turned to Marcy. "Darling! You've got to burn that manuscript! Why, these little rats—these vermin are—"

Marcy dropped to one knee in front of Putter. The *tarmut's* face had gone livid. "Please," Marcy begged. "Paul isn't himself! It's the newness of all this! Please be merciful!"

Putter had raised the pipe to his lips. He lowered it slightly, his small eyes baleful.

"Did you kill my grandfather with that thing?" Paul asked.

"No. He fell by accident." Putter's expression twisted into a sneer. "But

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he was afraid of me, deathly afraid. It was really his fear that killed him."

"I don't believe that."

Marcy turned to Paul. "Darling! For God's sake be quiet. Stop fighting with him. That will get us nowhere."

"Why don't you leave me alone?" Paul demanded of Putter. "I want nothing you have. Even if it's true that your kind are success-makers, I want no success—"

"You're going to be the greatest actor in the line."

"But I don't want to be. I have no ambition to be."

"You only think you haven't. But that makes no difference, really. It's for my own satisfaction. I want to complete the circle. Three immortals—grandfather—father—son. It will be a great triumph for me. No *tarmut* can boast of such an accomplishment."

Marcy took Paul by the arm, but kept her eyes on Putter. "Let me take him away now. I'll talk to him. Convince him. Give us until tomorrow. I'll bring him back."

Putter put his silver pipe away and adjusted his coat. "Very well. I'll expect you here tomorrow. I'll give you the night to work on him. But if you don't succeed, I have methods of my own."

In somewhat of a daze, Paul realized that Marcy was leading him up the corridor away from the room. "How does that little rat get in and out?" he asked. "I didn't see any holes in the wall."

"Paul! Don't call them names! It can only lead to trouble!"

"They must have cleverly concealed doors in the baseboard."

"Let's go home, Paul. I want to talk to you."

THE CLOCK on the night table read 3 A. M. and Paul was marveling at the vitality of the girl he'd married. His own head was foggy; his mind stupid for want of sleep. But Marcy's eyes still blazed.

"Paul—I'll forget everything else, but you can't deny me my right to be proud of my husband. And whether you will admit it or not, you do have ambition. Wouldn't it be wonderful? Paul Fleming—the third of an illustrious line—scoring a triumph on Broadway in *The Shining Mountain!*"

Paul yawned. "The play could be a success with someone else, angel. Hammond liked it."

"But, Paul, don't you understand? Putter would never let it be a success that way. He had it written as a vehicle for you. It's you or no one."

"You mean he could stop it? That's absurd."

"No! Believe me! And beyond that, it would be dangerous to cross him."

Paul opened his eyes and smiled tenderly at Marcy. "You want that play produced, don't you? That's the most important thing."

"You're being unfair! I have your interests at heart, too."

Paul closed his eyes again. "You plan to play the part of Christina?"

"Yes, but only to be near you all the time, Paul. To help you. Christina is a minor part. I'm satisfied at having written the play, seeing my name as author."

"Wait a minute, angel. Aren't you a little confused?"

Marcy burst into tears. "I did write it! It's mine! Mine so far as the world is concerned."

Paul reached over and laid a hand on her shoulder. He smiled tenderly. In all this madness of success and near-success, only one thing was certain. He loved Marcy.

"Would it make you happy if I said yes?"

Marcy's face came out of the pil-

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low. She threw her arms around Paul. "Oh darling! It would! It would! You'd make me the happiest girl in the world."

"And you'd let me get some sleep?"

"You poor angel! I've kept you up all night. Go to sleep, darling. We'll have to be at the theater early. Putter will be waiting."

Paul sighed. "Okay. We'll let Putter mold this poor clay. But I'll bet he fails. I'm no more of an actor than a stuffed chicken."

"You will be a great actor. The *tarmuts* never fail."

Marcy kissed him and snapped off the light. Paul lay back and stared into the darkness. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad at that. Paul Fleming in *The Shining Mountain*. The glitter of opening night. Just once, to please Marcy. Then he'd have done with the thing.

CHAPTER III

The Chosen Ones

AT FIRST, Paul had tinges of regret, nagging fears and a feeling of shame. But these were quieted by the sight of Marcy's happiness. The anticipation of fame to come had brightened her cheeks and put even an added sparkle into her eyes. In her joy, Paul was also joyful.

Also, the revitalization of the Lyceum filled him with great satisfaction. As the coat of dirt and grime was scraped from the old lady's face; as new paint and glitter was applied, she took on all the fairy glamour of old.

Joshua Blent, too, seemed to straighten and grow younger. Again he was in his element, directing the workmen, filling a useful role, serving a Fleming employer.

Joshua never asked Paul about the regular trips to the sub-basement. Paul and Marcy made them surreptitiously, but Joshua would have been dull indeed had he not noticed. Also, he never asked Paul about what lay in the room of corridor C. Even that first day, when Paul came up from breaking the door to take the phone call from Sam Hammond, Joshua had not made inquiry. And so quietly efficient, so self-effacing was the old man, that Paul never thought to notice the strangeness of this.

The master-orders concerning the play and the theater came from Putter. There was the point of a director.

"Hammond will do," Putter said. "But keep him away until the Lyceum is ready. In the meantime, we have work."

Soon Paul was completely engrossed in the job of becoming an actor.

"God knows I've got my work cut out for me," Putter said. "The lines in *The Shining Mountain* are heavy, almost Shakespearean, the hardest in the world to put over. You haven't even got a voice, let alone a stage presence or an instinct to act. Richard and David were stupid enough, heaven knows, but I think you could give them cards and spades."

"Listen, we aren't going to start off this way?"

"What way?"

"I'll work hard. I'll do what you tell me, but I won't take your insults."

"Oh, won't you now? We'll see about that. You'll take what I choose to give you. That and no more."

"I'm damned if I will!"

But always there was Marcy at his side, her hand on his arm. "Darling—please. It's for your own good—our good. Don't you want to be great like your father? Don't you want to go down in the history of the theater?"

"Not particularly."

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"But for me, Paul. For *The Shining Mountain.*"

Paul's capitulation was always the same. "All right. I'll try. If it will make you happy."

AS TIME progressed, as he writhed under the scorn and the whip of the *tarmut,* Paul was forced to concede Putter the compliment of admiration. The little man's ability bordered upon the miraculous. In a very few days, Paul realized Putter's grasp of the subject was stupendous.

Often he caught himself thinking: If that brain could go into a normal head—move about over a normal body—Putter would be the greatest actor who ever lived!

The *tarmut* could get results in so short a time it staggered the imagination. Proof of this came to Paul a week after work started in earnest. Paul had come up the side aisle of the Lyceum to see Joshua Blent just leaving the semi-darkened auditorium for the inner foyer.

"Joshua," Paul called.

The old man stopped, stiffened as though someone had thrust a knife in his back. He turned slowly as Paul approached. The latter saw pasty whiteness on his face.

Joshua said, "Oh—Paul. You gave me a start. For sure you did."

"Sorry. How so, Joshua?"

The caretaker was trembling. "It was the old gentleman again to the life. Richard Fleming had one of the greatest voices in the theater and there it was in my ears all over again."

And Paul realized his voice had changed. It was deeper, with a resonance that carried effortlessly across space. He saw Joshua's eyes upon him.

"You've changed a lot, Paul. You're more like him every day."

Paul laughed. "A change for the better?"

Joshua shrugged. "I saw it happen to your dad. Now I'm seeing it happen to you. I—I don't know, son. I don't know whether it's for the better or not."

The next day Paul made use of a respite in the bitter basement routine to say, "You've made me over, Putter, and I can't understand it. Would you mind telling me what you've done? That's the mystery."

Putter dragged on his tiny cigarette and scowled. "What are you yammering about?"

Paul ignored the challenge. "I'm bewildered. I'm merely asking you how you did it. What you did."

"Isn't that a little like a cow asking the farmer what makes a milking machine work?"

Paul reddened and felt Marcy's hand on his arm.

Putter pinched out his cigarette and put the butt carefully in his pocket. A thought flashed through Paul's mind: *"He's genius personified. He can work miracles. Yet he has to pick up his cigarette butts and hide them. No wonder he's bitter.*

BUT PUTTER seemed to want a little glory. He had sensed the appreciation in Paul's words and it seemed to soften him a trifle. "The reason for your successful metamorphosis is beyond your conception, because you can't grasp the principles involved. I'd never be able to explain how the change came about. I could as well try to explain a landscape to a man who has been blind all his life. You can't grasp the principles underlying basic motivations and structures. I can. That's the difference between us."

Paul spoke with a sudden surge of warmth. "Why can't we be friends, Putter?"

A glitter came into the *tarmut's* eyes.

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"Don't try to step out of your class, Fleming. *Tarmuts* don't make friends with bumbling scum!"

In sudden rage, Paul's hand lashed out. It hit nothing. Putter changed position almost faster than the eye could follow.

"Fleming, I've had about enough of that! Try it again and it will be your last move."

Paul made a titanic effort to get a grip on himself. He sat down and pressed a fist into a hand. "Putter, you said that before. Are you serious? Do you actually kill people? How could you do that and remain invisible to the bulk of mankind? You'd be smoked out—discovered."

"Again the infantile mind. How many men drop dead of heart failure every day? Heart failure—that's a broad term. It's what everyone dies of. It covers a lot of deaths your blundering doctors do not understand—and never will."

"Let's get on with our work," Marcy said uneasily. "Paul is upset, Putter. You must overlook some of the things he does."

Paul turned to stare dully at Marcy. "Dear wife," he asked in a choked voice. "Who's side are you on?"

"Paul! Paul! You've got to stop resisting. You've got to work with Putter. I told you success wasn't easy."

Paul stared for a moment into space. Then his shoulders slumped a trifle. "All right, maestro. Where do we go from here?"

There was wicked satisfaction in Putter's grin. "The second act, third scene. The lines during the drinking bout with the court lords. You handle them like a man breaking in a new set of teeth."

About a month later, the *tarmut* stood in a chair in the room in corridor C and said, "Well, that's it. You're ready for Hammond now. Not even his blunders can dim your performance. Tell him to go to work."

"We're very grateful to you," Marcy breathed. "You're sure *The Shining Mountain* will be a hit?"

Putter turned cold eyes upon her. "You're a stinking actress," he said acidly. "You're a mess and I haven't tried to do a thing with you. You know, of course, I want you in that part for only one reason."

They waited.

"It's a small part and you can't hurt the play. Your main job is to keep an eye on him." Putter favored Paul with a contemptuous glance. "The part will let you stay close to him most of the time. You're going to have to brace him up a lot, because he's made of the same rotten stuff David and Richard were made of."

Paul stiffened, but Putter ignored him. "Rotten, all of you! Strutting around in pants too big for you. Robbing our brains and calling what you find there yours!"

Putter sneered at Marcy. He laughed. "Congratulations, Mrs. Fleming. You wrote a wonderful play. It will be a sensation. You're a genius, Mrs. Fleming. How does it feel to be a genius?"

Agony flamed in Paul Fleming's brand new voice. "Marcy! Darling! Let's not take this! We can't take it! Life's too short to lose our self-respect, our decency!"

Marcy clung to him. "Paul—don't, don't! Not when everything is so perfect. It's the only way. This is the only way anyone ever got anything. We aren't alone in wanting success and getting it!"

"Let's get out of here! Let's go home!"

"Don't rush away," Putter said, laughing. "Thrash it out between you. This is what makes a *tarmut's* work so satisfying; listening to geniuses

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modestly acclaiming the true source of their greatness. You wouldn't deprive me of a little pleasure would you?"

"I said let's get out of here," Paul grated. As they moved up the dark hallway, they could hear the squeaky laughter of Putter following them.

THE CURTAIN fell. There was a vast hush in the refurnished Lyceum Theater; a hush on both sides of the curtain. Standing beside Marcy, Paul felt her nails digging into the flesh of his palm.

"Not a sound," Marcy whispered. "Not a sound." Her words were an agonized prayer.

Then faint thunder was heard through the curtain to rise swiftly into a mighty thundering that shook the stage. The curtain was drawn and Paul saw the entire audience on its feet.

His mind was in a turmoil, but cold and clear in its center, was the thought: This is the final proof. All along I'd hoped against hope somehow that tonight it would all prove a horrible dream. Even in the clearest waking hours I'd hoped this. A flop would have done it. If they'd walked out on us—that would have done it. If the play had made us the laughing stock of the town. But it's a hit. It will become a classic.

The curtain rang down only to rise again.

Wait—maybe there's still hope. The critics. They have the final say. Maybe they'll pan it. It looks like a hit tonight, but it could go into its grave tomorrow morning.

In the front of the house, Joshua Blent tolled off the count. Ten—eleven — twelve — thirteen — fourteen.

A slight chill went through his thin old body. Fourteen curtain calls!

And the years rolled back and he saw it all again. David Fleming in *The Seventh Devil.* Fourteen curtain calls in the old Lyceum so many years before.

Joshua turned away. "Guess I lived too long," he muttered. "It's like this is where I came in and it's all happening over again. Once—twice. And now three times? What are the odds against it? What are the odds, anyhow?"

Marcy was radiant. She danced around the dressing room after she'd taken bows alone when the call of Author! Author! had rung out. She stopped dancing and flung her arms over the shoulders of Paul Fleming who sat slumped at his dressing table.

"Congratulations, darling! You're a great actor! That's what they'll all be saying! You read my lines to perfection! You weren't acting! You lived that handsome dashing Norseman with the horns on his helmet. And that drinking scene—it was magnificent!"

She realized Paul wasn't responding. "Paul, aren't you going to congratulate me, darling? How does it feel to be the husband of a great playwright?"

Paul reached into a drawer and brought out a bottle of scotch. "I feel as though I'd just gotten through robbing a grave, Marcy. Do you want a drink?"

AFTER A few stiff shots, Paul felt better. A glow came over him to warm his body and dull his brain. He and Marcy sneaked away from the crowds and went home to wait for the papers. At home, Paul had two more drinks, so that Marcy's voice came as an echo from far away when she read the notices.

"Listen to this Paul—*'and amazing as it sounds, this third-generation Fleming, named Paul, is a finer actor than even the immortal David who—*

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they say—eclipsed the magnificent founder of the line, Richard Fleming himself.

"'Of course Paul Fleming had the devil's own luck in making his debut in a play that transcended anything this critic has ever seen. Ibsen, Moliere, even the immortal bard will have to move over and make room for Marcy Lynn.

"'Marcy Lynn, as everyone now knows, is the wife of Paul Fleming. An excellent way to tie up a smash-hit play. Marry the writer.

"'So great is The Shining Mountain, it almost smacks of a fluke. Only time will tell. We'll all be waiting with our eyes wide open to see if the brilliant Marcy Lynn can repeat.'"

Paul came suddenly out of his lethargy. He gazed at his wife with horror. "Repeat! Repeat! Great God, Marcy! Do you realize what that means?"

"Of course, Paul. They'll all be watching me. And I've got to make good! I've got to write another one. An even better one!"

"No, Marcy! No! We're done! We've got to get out of this trap!"

"What trap, Paul? We aren't in any trap. We're brilliant, successful, fabulous people. We've fought hard to get where we are. You must be insane to think of giving it up!"

Paul's brain cleared as from shock. His lip curled. "So you've got to repeat. You've got to write a better one. Marcy! I believe you actually think you wrote *The Shining Mountain!* I think you really feel it's your brainchild! It isn't, Marcy. A rotten, sneering little midget gave it to you!"

"He didn't! He didn't! I worked for it! I worked hard, and I'll work harder."

"By work you mean you gritted your teeth against his insults. Stood for his abuse! Debased yourself!"

"Paul, why do you persist in keeping that crazy viewpoint. It's unwholesome, darling. Unhealthy. We owe it to the world to take what the *tarmuts* will give us in order to make the world a better place to live in. They're satisfied to do it—to give it to us. Why shouldn't we be satisfied to take it?"

"And consider ourselves fortunate for having been chosen?"

Marcy raised her head defiantly. "Why not?"

A wave of contrition swept Paul. He reached out and took Marcy in his arms. "Angel—I'm sorry. Please forgive me. Maybe I'll conform eventually. Maybe I'll get into the groove. Right now, I'm a pretty bewildered guy." He kissed her. "And a pretty hard one to get along with, I'm afraid."

Marcy was eager to make peace. She kissed him avidly. "Then you are happy for my success?"

"Of course, angel. Let's go to bed now. I'll congratulate you again in the morning."

With Marcy's soft body in his arms—the darkness enfolding them—Paul closed his eyes and felt some of the tension loosen within him.

"Hang onto me, darling. Don't let me go into a tailspin."

"I wanted to mention that, Paul. Aren't you drinking a little too much? Don't you think you should ease up a little?"

"Tomorrow I'll go on the wagon."

PAUL AWAKENED to a somewhat brighter world. It seemed a reaction had set in and the pendulum was swinging from the dark and bitter side into the light of personal satisfaction. There was he discovered, a certain heady triumph in being the talk of the town, in being courted and lionized.

This was his opinion and feeling, but at times he wasn't quite sure if

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his feeling didn't come from seeing Marcy so happy. He continually pushed her to the fore, saw to it that the spotlight centered upon her at every opportunity.

And Marcy thrived on it. She was a flower that bloomed brightest in the light of success, and Paul's heart warmed itself from the flame of her pleasure.

Putter had dropped from sight, and Paul felt that that too contributed to his contentment. He had not seen the *tarmut* since ten days before the opening, when he and Marcy had made a final visit to the small room.

However, Putter was not to remain invisible forever. The play had been running two weeks when Paul entered the theater alone one morning about ten o'clock. He dropped into a side seat and closed his eyes for a moment, trying to visualize his father storming about the stage in *The Seventh Devil*. A voice, squeaky, sneering, broke into his thoughts.

"And how is the great actor, this morning?"

Paul did not move nor open his eyes. "I thought I was rid of you."

"You'll never be rid of me."

"That's where you're wrong. I've given it some thought. I've figured it out. You have no hold over me whatever."

"Haven't I?"

"No. Making a man an actor is a little different from writing a play for Marcy. What you gave me can never be taken away. I can laugh at you now. What I have is my own."

Dry laughter. "How big a fool can you be? Can't you see that you're slipping already."

"That's silly."

"Is it? Night before last, there were only two curtain calls, and the second was perfunctory—out of politeness. You made five bad mistakes last night; seven the night before."

A sudden chill went through Paul, but he deliberately stiffened himself. "There is nothing wrong with me I can't correct myself."

"Is that so? Let's find out. Will you take my word for the seven mistakes? If I say so, will you admit they were made?"

"I suppose so."

"Very well—what were they?"

Paul could find no words.

Putter laughed, a stinging, scathing laugh. "What you overlooked, Fleming is this: you aren't an actor. You have no talent. That's a misnomer you creatures have invented so you can think well of yourselves. You are nothing more than a battery. All your kind are batteries. What you mistake for ability is nothing more than the charge we *tarmuts* put into you. Your charge is running down. Another week and they'd start laughing at you."

Paul clenched his fists. He tried to tell himself it was a lie; an untruth spoken by this little monster in order to hold power. But he knew it was the truth.

The day he'd last walked out of the room in corridor C, he'd had an almost exhalted feeling as to the thing he was going to do; an understanding of it. Now, he realized, that understanding was hazy to the point of incomprehension. And as to the mistakes—only seven? In his heart of hearts, he'd felt his late performances to be riddled with errors.

Putter's dry chuckle from somewhere. "Be in the room at one o'clock. We've got some work to do."

AT THREE o'clock, Paul walked up the corridor, out of the basement with clenched fists and gritted teeth. Putter's derisive laughter followed him. Paul's rage was a mixture of two things. The maddening, soul-breaking Putter, and knowledge that

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he would tonight give his finest performance.

It had been so simple for the *tarmut* to give him exactly what he needed.

No wonder they hate us so, Paul thought. We're so utterly stupid. We're such fools. He remembered a casual observation made by Putter during the session.

"If you idiots were left to yourselves, every government in the world would collapse; every business institution would be in a hopeless mire in a month. All the wheels would stop turning. Someday, we may decide to let it happen. If we ever do, you'll see riot and catastrophe, blood running in the streets."

Paul shuddered and headed for the nearest bar.

A week later, Marcy said, "Paul, aren't you drinking again? Too much, that is? I realize a few drinks are all right, but last night, on the stage, you were reeling."

"Leave me alone—leave me alone!"

"Paul! You never spoke that way to me before! I won't stand for it! I don't have to!"

Paul laughed with sharp bitterness. "No, a little short temper from me is intolerable, but when you go into the basement of the Lyceum, you get down and kiss the floor. You'll take any insult hurled at you."

"I think you're—despicable."

"Am I? I'll practice hard. Pretty soon I may get to be as despicable as Putter. Will that make me a genius?"

"Despicable and—rotten!"

They didn't speak to each other for two days. Paul finally gave in and made the overture to find Marcy suffering, yearning for a reconciliation.

They made up, but somehow it didn't give Paul the lift it should have. He had a session with Putter that afternoon and came out a better actor, but a far more embittered man.

He went straight to the bar across the street right after the performance that night, and stayed there until he was sure the theater would be empty. Then he returned, reeling drunk.

The theater was not empty. Joshua Blent was waiting for him. "I kind of thought you'd be back."

Paul shook his head sharply to clear the cobwebs. "Why did you think that?"

The old man shook his head also, but slowly, sadly. "I don't know. Habit maybe—or memory. I can recall how it was before—twice before. You're going the same road they did, Paul. Why? What's on your mind? What's eating you?"

Paul grinned. "What was it they said? Something about losing their souls? Maybe it's happening again, Josh."

"You better go home and get some sleep. You've got a matinee tomorrow."

Paul went out and hailed a cab. A matinee. That was a break. He wouldn't have to look upon Putter's sneering face until the next day.

PAUL AND Marcy had their next serious quarrel a month later. Marcy's complaint seemed entirely justified.

"I'm getting tired of having my play butchered. More often than not you're drunk during the performance."

Paul grinned. "The audience doesn't know it though. That proves I'm a born trouper. Come rain, shine, or a hangover—the show goes on."

"It's getting pretty disgusting."

"Putter thinks so, too. But he can't do any more than you can about it. It's my one last freedom. The privilege of getting drunk."

Marcy changed her tack. "Paul, why do you do it? Why do you deliberately throw away greatness?"

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"Whose greatness? If you say mine, I'll hang you out the window by your heels."

"It's yours as much as any of us can call it ours."

Paul sought to take Marcy's hand, and failed as it was drawn away. "That, darling, is the greatest concession I've ever heard you make to good old Blatter and good old Putter."

Marcy was not one to give up, as Paul had long since discovered. "Darling, what if everyone whom the *tarmuts* have helped felt the same way? Think what would happen to the country. It's the wrong attitude. It's the weak attitude."

Paul laughed. "Hooray for the weaklings!"

Marcy got up and stormed from the room. As she slammed the door, Paul's eyes filled with pain. "Marcy! Marcy!" But he did not follow her.

THE SHINING MOUNTAIN, at the end of six months, showed no sign of waning popularity. That the star, Paul Fleming, grew more gaunt with the passing weeks, may or may not have been noticed. Probably not, because his magnificent performances drew continual comment.

One critic wrote: *"Paul Fleming is one of the truly great actors of our generation. We have seen him go on-stage when obviously ill. One gets the impression he is incapable of turning in a bad performance."*

It was far into the night after the second day of the seventh month, that Joshua Blent found Paul Fleming sprawled on his dressing table with an empty bottle on the floor beside him.

Blent stood looking at the actor for a long time before he stirred him with a hand on his shoulder.

"Paul. Wake up, Paul. It's almost morning."

"Wha—wha—" Paul raised his head sharply, as though getting set to avoid a blow. He saw Blent and smiled through the heavy growth on his jowls. "Need a shower and shave," he mumbled. "Must have fallen asleep."

Joshua had drawn a chair up close to the table. His honest old eyes were filled with pity, but also there was a grimness on his face. "Are you about ready to nail up the door, Paul?"

"What do you mean?"

"I think you know."

"Don't get it at all. Gotta have a shower. The water still hot?"

"Never mind the water. I want to talk to you."

"Sure, Josh. Always glad to talk with you."

"You've got to give it up, Paul!"

"No—no. Don't worry about me. Doing fine. Show'll run for years."

"I remember when your grandfather said that—almost those same words. But you've got to give it up."

"Nope. Got to go on."

Blent looked sadly at the bottle lying on the floor. "There's no chance of my talking you into quitting?"

"Not a chance."

Paul was too bleary to notice the new hardness in Joshua Blent's manner. The old man had stiffened somehow as though iron, built deep into him, had become uncovered.

"Then I've got to make my own move."

"What do you mean?"

"I've learned a lot, Paul, in the last four months. Seems like a man's got to get into his latter years before he starts getting sense."

"I don't get any of this." Paul picked up the bottle, found it empty, dropped it.

"I started getting smart when I made a decision. That was when I saw you go down the same path Richard and David walked; the same

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changes; the same cracking-up process. I'd always blamed it on liquor, but this time I did a little thinking. Once—that could happen. Twice—still logical. But three times? Against all odds. Grandfather, father, son, all following the same path because of whiskey? And all the same way down to the last detail? It didn't make sense to me, so I did some investigating."

"What kind of investigating?"

"I watched. I went around on tiptoe. I listened."

"You saw—"

"Paul, I don't know what's behind it all, but I saw those terrible puppets. I've watched and I've seen three of them around the theater. Now I know it wasn't a rat in the balcony that time when Richard fell. The whole thing had me wondering about my sanity. I didn't believe what I saw, so I got a camera and did some spying on you downstairs. It wasn't my tired old eyes, Paul. Negatives don't lie."

Paul reached forward and squeezed Blent's shoulder in a sudden gesture. "You have proof? On camera film?"

"I've got it. The way I figure, they must have grown careless after all these years. Must have considered me a doddering old fool."

Paul sprang to his feet, both fists in the air, his eyes blazing. "Of course! Why didn't I think of it. We've got them, Josh. We'll tip over their little apple cart, but good."

"I think that's the only way you'll get free of them," Joshua said quietly.

Paul sank weakly into his chair. "No. It isn't any good. Nobody would believe it even with pictures. They'd yell trick photography. They'd laugh at us."

"Maybe, maybe not. But I've got the films and the negatives in my desk. Tomorrow morning I'm going to call in the reporters. Will you back me up?"

Paul's eyes softened as he took Joshua Blent's hand. "Good old Josh. You don't understand what it's all about. But you don't care. All you think about are the Flemings."

"I've been loyal to the Flemings a good many years, son. It's hard to change a habit like that. When they get hurt, I fight."

"Sure I'll back you up, Josh. I'll be down tomorrow. We'll do the world a service, you and I—together."

"You better go home and get some sleep now. Come down when you wake up."

"Good old Josh. Good old Josh. My only friend."

PAUL AWOKE at nine o'clock the following morning feeling brighter and more refreshed than for a long, long time. He had expected to awaken with dread, to find the resolution of the previous night turned to water in his mind.

But this was not the case. It was, if anything, stronger, intercharged and laced with a wonderful, heady sense of coming freedom.

Marcy was not home. All too frequently of late she had not been home when Paul was around. Paul thought of this, and his feeling of warmth increased. That situation, too, would be straightened out. Both he and Marcy would get their feet on the ground and find each other again. All this madness would vanish.

Deep in his heart he knew he was leaning on a false prop; he knew the world would not believe Joshua's photos. They'd never trip up the *tarmuts*. These things he knew, but he pushed them resolutely from his mind. He had to because the hope was too great, so heartening he did not dare question the source.

He found one of the front doors of

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the Lyceum propped open. A uniformed policeman was standing inside.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Paul Fleming. I own this theater."

The policeman touched his cap. "Oh, sure. Sorry, Mr. Fleming. Should have recognized you."

"Is there some trouble?"

The policeman waved Paul on. "Better go inside. They'll tell you."

Paul found a small cluster of men, uniformed and otherwise, around the door to the office. One of them glanced up.

"Oh—Mr. Fleming. We were trying to get in touch with you."

"What's the trouble—an accident?"

The other shook his head. "No. Natural death. He was pretty old. His heart stopped."

Paul pushed on in. Joshua was on a stretcher covered completely, a thin, pitiful form beneath brown canvas.

"We found him with his head on the desk. A workman reported it. The coroner said heart failure."

Paul trembled. Found his voice. "Was...there anything in the drawers of his desk?"

"A few odds and ends. We checked them to get your phone number. Why? Something missing?"

"No pictures. No film negatives?"

"Uh-uh. Nothing like that."

Something slipped in Paul's mind. It happened suddenly and he did not question the happening or the change. He moved close to a uniformed policeman, snatched the gun from his leather hip-holster and rushed out of the office. After that, it was pretty bad.

The cop who lost the gun told his wife about it that night. "You never saw anything like it, baby. Talk about psychos. This Fleming grabbed my rod and dived out into the theater. I saw his eyes as he went. Mad—baby. Stark raving mad. He ripped up the aisle waving the gun and screaming. It's like he must have been reading some lines from a play or something. He kept yelling, 'God damn your rotten little souls to hell! I'll smash you!'"

"Dan! The children. I don't think they're asleep yet."

"Oh...well, anyhow, it was like that and a lot worse. We finally got him—pinned his arms and got the gun away from him, but it was pretty touchy for a while."

PAUL CAME to in a clean-smelling white room. He looked around groggily. Then his head cleared a little and he recognized the night quiet of a hospital.

He grinned with guile. These fools. It would be so simple. He tried twice before he made the floor. He stood swaying for a few minutes. Then he got some strength back and looked for his clothes. They were in a closet near the bed.

He dressed and found his way out of the hospital with no trouble at all, drifting like a shadow past the night nurse bent over the chart table. He hailed a cab and was dropped off in front of the Lyceum.

"Just to get my hands on him for ten seconds," Paul crooned. "Just to get the murdering little savage between my hands. I'll play it cozy. I'm not a great actor for nothing. I'll get close to him and grab. I won't miss this time." He entered the theater. He whispered, "Putter—Putter dear old boy. I'm coming. I want another lesson."

He entered the stage from the wings preparatory to crossing over and going into the basement. A voice stopped him mid-stage: "What do you want here at this hour? I thought they took you to the hospital?" A thin, squeaky voice.

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"Hello, Putter. No. They let me out. There was nothing wrong with me."

"Let you out at three o'clock in the morning! You stupid dolt—you're stark raving mad."

"No, Putter—not mad. Feel good. Let's go to the basement. I'm slipping. I need some coaching."

"You make me sick."

The small shadow was close to Paul's leg. He set himself, dived for it. Nothing. Only mimicking laughter. Squeaky laughter.

Paul went berserk. Around and around after shadows. Screaming. "Damn you! Damn all of you rotten little stinking vermin."

And louder laughter. Louder and more hilarious until there was no more. And no more screaming.

CHAPTER IV

Requiem

"IT WAS HIS heart, Mrs. Fleming. Somehow he sneaked away from that hospital—how, we'll never know. His mind was pretty well gone and he must have longed for the stage. That was where we found him. Lying in the middle of the stage. But he'd drunk far too much over too long a period of time, and his heart couldn't stand the strain."

"Thank you. Thank you very much. I'd like to be alone now."

"Certainly, Mrs. Fleming. I'm terribly sorry."

IT WAS A very large funeral. Marcy looked very lovely and very dramatic in black, the veil adding the right touch of melancholy mystery.

But she suffered. She suffered a great deal; mainly afterwards when she was at home alone. She stayed in seclusion for a week. Then she went to the Lyceum one afternoon when all was quiet.

She went to the basement, into corridor C. As she approached the room, she held her breath. If it had been boarded up again... But it wasn't. She entered and waited for some moments. Then she called:

"Blatter."

There was a time of waiting.

"Blatter."

"What do you want?"

"I've got to write another play."

A harsh derisive chuckle. "What's stopping you?"

"Blatter—be kind to me. I must do it. A memorial to him."

Blatter jerked at a tiny white cuff under the sleeve of his little coat. "Is there no limit to the depths you'll crawl into? And you call us monsters!"

"No, Blatter. Not me. Only the weak ones do that. The unworthy ones. I respect you. Can't you be kind to me?"

The little man rocked on his heels, grinning. "Sure I can. I can toughen you. Make you even harder than you are. Only a *tarmut* could do that."

"Another play, Blatter. I'll work—I'll slave."

"You've no idea. You think it was tough the last time? Wait until this one is finished. I've only begun on you. Only begun. This time I'm going to have fun. I'm going to see how low you really are; how deep you'll dig your nose into the mud. Up to now we've been pretty decent about it. From now on..."

"Please, Blatter. I must write another play."

"Very well. Come back tomorrow, and—"

"And what?"

Blatter grinned. "Never mind. Just come. There'll be plenty of time."

Marcy walked out. From the room, as she moved away, came the thin, fierce laughter of a *tarmut*.

THE END

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the answer could be

"DER GYROBUS"

By Ruth Hirsch

EXTREMELY favorable reports are leaking out from Switzerland on the strange "motorless motorbus" about which we commented a year ago. In some respects, it may cause a minor revolution in city transportation all over the world, in terms of economy, comfort, silence, cleanliness, efficiency and lack of noise and tremendous ease of maintenance.

The vehicle, which the Swiss call "Der Gyrobus", looks like the conventional motor coach so familiar in cities all over the world. It is driven, however, by an electric motor geared to the rear wheels. The motor in turn gets its electrical energy from a generator mounted beneath the center of the bus. However, no trolleys jut from the roof and the vehicle carries no batteries! How does it run?

The trick is unique and ingenious. A one ton flywheel is connected to the generator at the center of the bus. When this is spinning at top speed, it carries enough inertial energy to make the generator produce enough "juice" for a four or five mile run. Spaced along the street at such intervals are rods or leads from the ordinary power lines. The driver raises a simple antenna apparatus with the touch of a push-button and this contacts the leads from which electrical power is drawn, once more "winding up" the flywheel or gyro or rotor!

"Der Gyrobus" proceeds for another four or five miles and renews its rotor speed. The speeding charge only takes a little more than a minute so there is no interruption in the service. The economy of the system is evident at once. The one-ton rotor goes up to a speed of three thousand rpm's and it is easy to see how it's possible to store up enough energy to drive the bus. The rotor, incidentally, rotates in super-fine ball bearings and is sealed in a case full of thin hydrogen gas (to offer less resistance)—with no load the rotor is so finely balanced and stores so much power that it will spin for nearly twelve hours without stopping! If manpower and fuel shortages strike us ever—let us hope not!—the Gyrobus may be the answer to American transportmen's prayers!

. . . when you see

THE WHITES OF THEIR EYES . . .

By Carter T. Wainwright

THE MATHEMATICAL study of strategy conceals a highly romantic operation under the prosaic title "theory of games." Highly abstruse, this theory is being applied with increasing success to the complexities of modern living, from how to handle a super-market to get maximum sales with minimum work, to how to destroy a submarine known to operate within a definite area opposed by a limited number of airplanes. So varied are the activities of this fascinating subject which basically stems from such familiar pastimes as poker and chess.

One of the most interesting and yet simplest of the problems posed by the theory of games, is the famous problem of the duellists. Two men armed with pistols face each other from a great distance and then slowly walk toward one another. The problem facing them is really acute. Since each has a single shot is it better to fire first or wait until they are close together? But if they do that, their opponents have a better chance in turn, of hitting them. What, asks the theory of games, is the ideal distance at which the assailants should fire at each other? The answer is not easy to obtain depending on many factors.

Now this simple problem of the duellists may be extended to any event in modern warfare. When should a fighter plane fire at an enemy? How can a tank balance its gunnery accuracy against its chances of being hit by the enemy? What path shall a submarine take to avoid enemy aircraft and still menace enemy shipping? It is with things like this, problems of "mini-max" —minimum loss and maximum advantage—that the theory of games is concerned.

Business, for example, is a game of this sort. You know some of the influencing factors. You gamble on others. What is the best possible way to operate?

The problems aren't new. It's just that the theory of games has finally nailed them down and now is preparing to assault the fortress with symbols. And symbolic attack is powerful, remember that. Mathematics has shown the potency of the symbolic approach. By extension these problems may be compared with national and even international issues. What is the advantage in a given nation using its atomic bombs in a certain way? And what a problem that one is!

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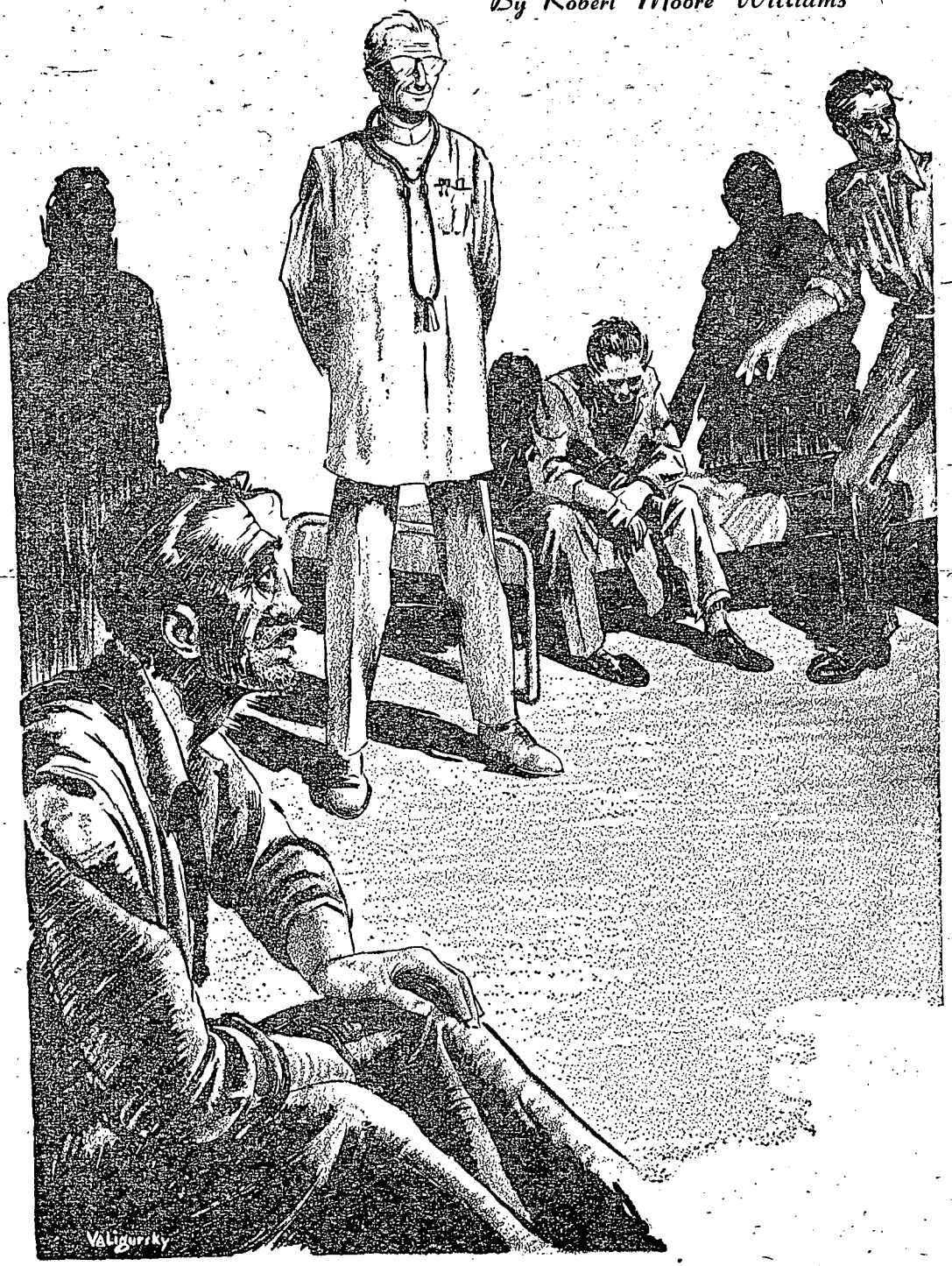
MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

By Robert Moore Williams



Terrified by Dr. Harkins' uncanny calm, Wilson tried futilely to escape

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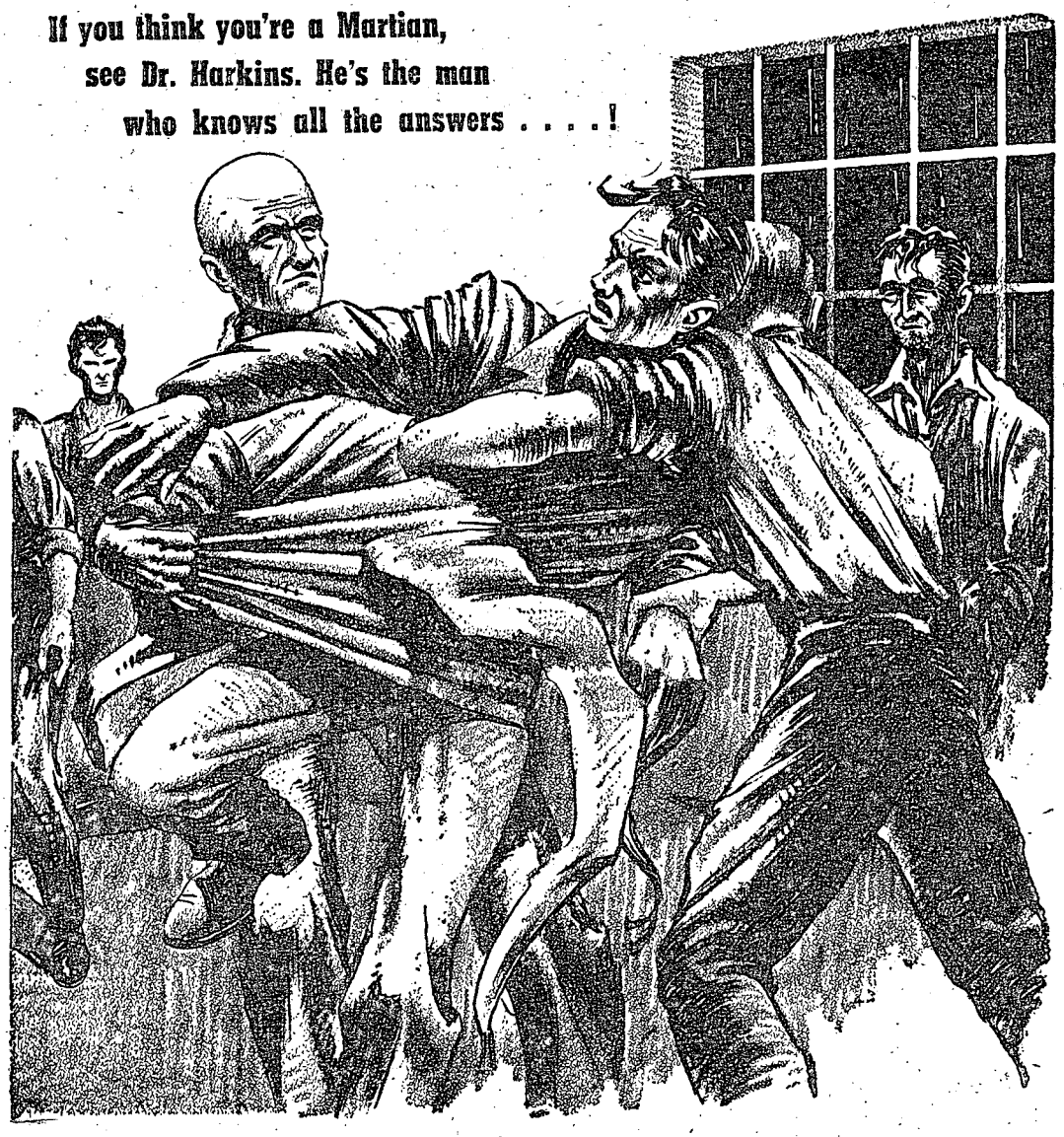
If you think you're a Martian, see Dr. Harkins. He's the man who knows all the answers . . . . !



MAKING HIS rounds of the big city hospital, Dr. Harkins heard the commotion begin in the receiving room. Since the grisly end-products of most of the accidents in the city—the stabbings, the fist fights, the accidents and the common drunks were all brought to the receiving room. many of the drunks still pugnacious and full of fight even after police mishandling—a commotion there was no unusual event. But as he listened to this commotion, Dr. Harkins caught elements of the unusual in it. A man was yelling in there.

Many men had yelled in that receiving room, many had screamed, many had cried, but never before had Dr. Harkins heard a man yelling as this one was.

"But I tell you they're Martians and they're after me!"

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Listening, Dr. Harkins felt his heart pick up. Was this what he had been waiting for? For years, he had been content to remain at this hospital, a staff physician on a small salary, while other younger men passed through as interns and went on to private practice and to handsome incomes. Young Dr. Griswold, on duty now in the receiving room, was another such intern. Dr. Harkins moved in that direction in a manner somewhat resembling a bloodhound that has picked up a hot scent and is ready to give voice on the trail.

For years, his associates had laughed at him, both to his face and behind his back, because he possessed an avid interest in what more sober-minded humans called "hallucinations and delusions", the phantoms of the mind. He had talked patiently to drunks screaming that little snakes were crawling all over them, to hop-heads who had insisted they were twanging a harp on a pink cloud in heaven, to plain psychotics convinced deep in the recesses of their own minds that they were God. All of which was grist for a book he claimed to be writing.

But a man who claimed that Martians were after him was a new phenomenon in his experience.

Going through the door from the inner corridor, Dr. Harkins saw the man standing in the middle of the receiving room. Two brawny cops, who were always on duty here, were standing just inside the door that led to the ambulance entrance. Dr. Griswold was there, trying hard to be calm, suave, and sure, though the perfect bedside manner which he was striving so hard to develop was showing the effects of strain at this moment. Dr. Griswold, in Harkins' private opinion, held the idea that a perfect bedside manner was more important to a physician than a knowledge of medicine.

THE MAN, who had apparently just been brought in, was tall and a little on the gawky side. His collar had been torn open, his tie hung in a dangling loop down the front of his shirt. Beads of sweat were visible on his forehead. Facing Dr. Griswold, he was saying: "I tell you I'm not just a common drunk. The Martians are after me."

The man's entire attention was focused on Griswold. Harkins paused just inside the door. The man did not notice the old doctor as he entered. Harkins waited, listened, every sense alert.

"How much did you have to drink before the Martians took after you?" Dr. Griswold said, impatiently.

The man seemed confused. "Well. . ."

"How much?" The crack of the lash sounded in the young physician's voice. He had no sympathy to spare for creatures such as this.

"Well, maybe a couple of bottles of beer. But I'm not just a common drunk—"

"Two bottles of beer!" Griswold's voice was icy. "That's what they all say." At the door, the two cops laughed. They were enjoying this badgering of a drunk.

"But that's the truth, in my case. There was a Martian—"

"Oh, hell's fire!" Griswold snorted. Obviously, his mind was already made up about this case. He glanced at the two policemen. "Take him—"

"Just a minute," Dr. Harkins said. For the first time, both Dr. Griswold and the patient became aware of him.

"Well!" Dr. Griswold spoke. His manner indicated that he did not welcome this intrusion, welcomed it all the less because Dr. Harkins was his superior.

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"Tell me about the Martians," Dr. Harkins spoke to the man. His voice was soothing and calm. It was the tone of voice you would use on a frightened child.

THE TONE did not soothe this man, but it did get his instant attention. Or perhaps something else got his attention. His eyes were instantly fixed on the old doctor who had just entered. They were inquiring eyes, they asked questions, they almost demanded answers. Looking at him, Dr. Harkins had the impression he could see wheels turning inside the man's head. Wary watchfulness, the appearance of a creature scenting danger, appeared on the man's face.

"How tall are they?" Harkins spoke.

"Well..." the man spoke hesitantly. There was something about this line of questioning he did not like. His dislike of it appeared on his face.

"I tell you—" Griswold started to say.

"Please!" Harkins said. Griswold's face showed traces of pink, but he was silent.

"What color are the Martians?" Harkins continued.

The man passed a groping hand across his face. A sort of a shudder seemed to pass over him. Instantly, his whole manner changed. He straightened up, all traces of doubt vanished from his face. "Hell, there weren't any Martians!" he said.

"No?" Harkins questioned. Whether he liked or disliked this change in manner was not apparent in his voice. "But just a minute ago you were saying—"

Anger blazed in the man's eyes. His right hand moved toward his coat, then stopped. "I don't care what I was saying. I was drunk. I had a touch of the willies. There wasn't anything else. I didn't see any Martians. I didn't see anything."

"But—"

"Let me outta here! I wanta go home." He turned toward the door as if he was ready to bolt.

The two cops stiffened, looked at him. And for the first time, he seemed to become aware not only of their presence there but of their purpose.

"Going somewhere, chum?" one spoke.

FOR A MOMENT, the man seemed to consider trying to fight his way out. Then he seemed to think better of that decision. He turned back to the two watching doctors.

"My names is James Wilson. I live at 16 East 49th Street. I am an electrician by trade. You can check all of this if you wish. I had three highballs and then shifted over to whiskey straight. I had at least five, possibly six slugs of straight whiskey. Me and my old lady had a fight and I was trying to forget it. I do not in the least question that I was drunk. I know somebody came into the tavern. I didn't like his looks, I got the willies and I started running. The cops grabbed me and brought me here. I was drunk then but I am sober now."

He spoke like a sober man. His carriage was erect, his voice had good timbre. He was positive without being antagonistic, calm without being lifeless. As he was speaking he was straightening his tie.

"He's cold sober," Griswold said in a whisper. "The shock of finding himself here has sobered him up. I would suggest we turn him loose."

"He's sober all right, but it wasn't necessarily the shock of finding himself here in the receiving room...." Dr. Harkins let his voice trail off into silence. "About the Martians, now?"

"There weren't any Martians," Wilson stated positively.

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"Um," Harkins mused. He considered the situation. There was only one answer that he could see. He nodded toward the two policemen. "Take him back to the drunk tank."

At the words, Wilson looked utterly dazed. He tried to protest, his mouth opened, but no sound came out. Griswold was also protesting. Harkins smiled. "We'll have to hold you until tomorrow. You will be released in the morning. Get a good night's sleep and give yourself a chance to sober up." He smiled encouragingly, a gesture which said this was the one logical course to pursue.

"But—"

"Come on, chum!" one of the cops said, taking hold of Wilson's arm.

"Get your hands off of me!"

Wilson fought. Or tried to. But he was powerless in the grip of two policemen. While Harkins and Griswold watched, the two cops half led, half dragged him away. His yells of protest came back after he was out of sight.

"Now, why did you insist on locking him up over night?" Griswold protested. "He was sober enough at the end—"

Harkins hardly heard the words. A musing look had appeared on his face. "A strange hallucination..."

"What was strange?"

"His idea that the Martians were after him."

"Oh, hell, he had just been reading fantastic literature."

"But suppose some Martians were really after him?"

"Are you out of your mind too?"

"But just suppose there are such things as real Martians," Harkins argued. "Suppose they sometimes appear here on Earth—"

He broke off as brakes sounded in the driveway outside the receiving room. Gruff voices sounded. "Get to hell in there, you!"

THE COPS from the police cruiser which had stopped in the driveway shoved a little man with spindly legs and an enormous chest through the doorway. "Name is Caldwell," one of the policemen said, poking his head in. "Drunk and disorderly. He's your baby now."

"All right," Harkins said. The cop disappeared.

Caldwell stood in the middle of the receiving room and beat his fist against his chest and screamed: "You can't do this to me. I'm a free-born citizen of Mars and I know my rights!"

"My God!" Griswold whispered. "Another one."

Harkins was silent. If he enjoyed the perturbation of this youthful medico, no sign of it appeared on his face.

Unlike Wilson, who had become completely sober in the receiving room, Caldwell showed no signs of such an astonishing recovery. He continued beating his chest and yelling that he was a free-born citizen of Mars. "Though of course subject to Zith, the great ruler." This last was said with a bow in the general direction of Griswold.

"He's bowing to you," Harkins said. "Maybe he thinks you're Zith."

"Oh, go to hell," Griswold answered. "Lock him up, too."

"But do we dare lock him up?" Harkins protested. "Remember, Wilson claimed the Martians were after him. Now this man claims he is a Martian. What if both stories are true? What if Caldwell is actually after Wilson?"

"Hell's fire, you ought to be locked up in the drunk tank too!" Griswold exploded. The perfect bedside manner which he was so carefully cultivating deserted him completely.

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Caldwell was still beating his chest and yelling that he was a free-born citizen of Mars, "though of course subject to Zith," when he was taken away. Unlike Wilson, he went willingly enough. A few minutes later, the screams commenced again.

The screams ripped through the air like hard-flung daggers.

"They're coming from the drunk tank!" Griswold said. "Come on."

The young medico left in a hurry. Dr. Harkins followed at a more leisurely pace. Before they reached the place, the screams had gone into silence.

An attendant was hastily unlocking the door. He quickly made room for the two physicians.

Wilson and Caldwell were lying on the floor in the middle of the room. They had fought with knives. Wilson was already dead, a knife firmly lodged in his heart, and Caldwell, a knife in his throat, was dying.

"Why did they fight? I mean, they didn't know each other, but as soon—"

Harkins was on his knees beside Caldwell, trying to see if anything could be done. He knew almost without looking that there was no chance. But in Caldwell's eyes, as life flickered out in them, was something of a look of triumph.

"Maybe they did know each other, somewhere else," Harkins whispered.

Glancing up, he saw that Griswold was looking like a small boy who wants nothing so much as a chance to run home to mother.

It was not an important event, in the history of this hospital. It was carried on the records as, "death resulting from a fight."

WHEN HIS duties were finished that night, Dr. Harkins went directly to the single room provided for him in the hospital. This room was to him a sort of refuge, a spot where he could get away from the moans of the pain-ridden, from the groans of the dying. As he sank down in the big chair in front of his desk, he was a tired old man. But somewhere about him there was a look of triumph, as if he had attained some important objective, reached some long-sought goal. Pulling a sheet of paper from the desk, he began to write. As he wrote, the look of some goal attained appeared more clearly than ever on his face.

TO: Zith, Supreme Ruler of Mars.

FROM: Agent 93.

SUBJECT: Elimination of renegade, Su Pathan.

It is with great pleasure that I announce that the mission on which we have worked for so many years has finally been accomplished. Her Tone succeeded in locating Su Pathan tonight. Su Pathan, aware that he had been discovered, tried to take refuge in one of the human hospitals, pretending to be intoxicated as an excuse for entering. Unfortunately, he recognized me and attempted to escape by denying that he was drunk. I was able, however, to succeed in having him held here, intending to dispose of him myself some time during the night. However, the arrival of agent 148, *Her Tone, made my intervention unnecessary. Agent* 148 *succeeded in killing Su Pathan, but unfortunately was also killed in the fight.*

No particular local disturbance resulted from these events. Humans are still unaware that Martians are and have been for many centuries on their planet.

I request recall to Mars.

The message was written in a curious script that looked like bird tracks.

When he had finished writing it, Harkins opened his desk drawer and took from it a small metal cylinder. Unscrewing the end, he fitted the fold-

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ed sheet of paper into the cylinder. Laying the cylinder on his desk, he stared musingly at it.

Suddenly, in the wink of an eye, it vanished.

Via sub-dimensional transit, about eighteen minutes would be needed for this cylinder and its message to be received on Mars. A much longer time would be needed, of course, for this transfer to be effected.

Leaning back in his chair, he lit a cigar and waited. Exactly forty minutes later, the cylinder reappeared on his desk as suddenly as it had vanished. Harkins opened it with hands that were suddenly trembling.

TO: Agent 93.

FROM: Kar Thoken, acting for supreme Zith.

SUBJECT: Elimination of renegade, Su Pathan.

1. *Congratulations.*
2. *Recall request granted.*
3. *Ship will call for you at regular terminal in exactly twenty-three days. Earth time.*

Harkins read the message from avid eyes that seemed to drink in every one of the hen tracks. When he had finished reading it, he laid it on his desk. The metal cylinder he put back into his drawer. Suddenly the sheet of paper puffed into flame and vanished. Harkins regarded that vanishing with approval.

Leaning back in his chair, he puffed contentedly at his cigar. Twenty-three days would be nothing. He could wait that long. There was a look of happiness on his face, such a look as may appear on the face of a man—or a Martian—who is going home after long, long years of effort on a strange, alien planet, going home to peace, going home to enjoy a well-deserved reward, going to a world where there were no young, self-important interns.

THE END

OUR RIGHTFUL HERITAGE

By Jonathon Peterson

THOSE OF US who are living in this period of history, were, through the accident of our birth, lucky to be born into a race of people superior in intellect, training, and achievements. Into an advanced civilization of culture, refinement and progress. The past three generations have left to all future generations more achievements in mechanical progress than all the preceding generations since the beginning of time have done.

The telescope has lengthened our vision a million times. The radio enables us to hear ten thousand miles away. We can see infinitesimal objects through the use of the X-ray and the microscope. Human life expectancy has been prolonged so that it is now many years greater than it has ever been before. Through the aid of the airplane, we can travel from one point to another with a greater speed than any other living creature. We have billions of mechanical devices doing the work that was formerly done by the muscular forces of man and beast.

Did these advances just naturally evolve from man's subconscious, without any effort on his part? Or are they the result of time, effort, necessity, and a mental growth? The answer is obvious.

Man's mental achievements are divided into several groups: History, art, literature, science, religion, philosophy. Which has added more to man's welfare is a controversial point—a question which will never be definitely agreed upon. It must be remembered, however, that the greatness of any subject is always to be measured by the influence it has over humanity—whether it affects men of all ages and all men of all races in the same way; whether its use has been constant or continuous; whether it has been effective in advancing man's progress or his happiness.

The law of preservation was—and is—man's greatest urge towards development and advancement. If he is to survive in the struggle for life, its impulse must be obeyed.

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. . . AND THEY BURIED THEIR DEAD

By Russell Newton Roman

THE ORIGINS OF the world's varied religions lie in man's belief in a power beyond his control and upon which he feels dependent. A perfect harmony of will between the individual and the power he worships is the highest ideal of all religion. Religion, like all other phases in the development of civilization, has passed through an evolutionary process. Like all phases of human activity, the greater and more advanced human culture becomes, the more variations appear in religion.

The earliest evidence of a primitive religion is found among the Mousterian cave dwellers who inhabited most of what is now Europe, about 50,000 years ago. Skeletons have been found here showing the manner in which these people buried their dead.

The bodies are surrounded with their favorite tools and weapons, and an abundant supply of food—usually part of some extinct animal. The bodies are in a reclining position, with one hand resting under the head. These facts bear evidence that these early half human, half animal tribes, had a belief in some life activities after death. Their burials suggest a connection with the ideas of the burials of the American Indian who believed the dead passed on to a "Happy Hunting Ground".

Since there was a distinct similarity of character between all primitive peoples, it is reasonable to suppose that the idea of a life after death found its way and became a common belief among all primitive people as they reached a certain degree of intelligence.

TODAY'S DREAMS — TOMORROW'S REALITIES

By Lee Owens

SOME OF the most famous authorities on the evolution of the human brain insist that the human brain is still in a most crude form—that as an average product, it is only about one-fourth finished.

Man has scientifically mastered many of the hidden forces of Nature, but not all of them by a long shot. The harnessing of these forces is still only in the very beginning. Who knows—maybe one day the heat generated by the sun will be bottled up and stored away for use in the winter time. Or perhaps the winter's cold may be preserved, so that Man can temper the climate to suit his own desires. Perhaps we will be able to transform night into artificial day permanently, by chemically utilizing the light generated by the firebug and the glow worm. It is inevitable that the force of the wind and of the ocean waves will one day be subject to the will of Man. As fabulous as long distance travel seems today, it will be conducted through the stratosphere at a speed now undreamed of. Mental telepathy will become an everyday science, doing away with the spoken language. Already Man has discovered how to artificially make rain—and this process will be perfected until its use becomes a common occurrence.

Who knows what geographic or climatic changes will take place during the next million years? Already four "ice ages" have taken place, changing climate and driving all life away each time, except that which was able to survive and accommodate itself to the extreme changes. The last of these ages formed our Great Lakes and changed the climate and shape of the Northern Hemisphere.

Because Evolution casts off Man's useless appendages, we may find ourselves a race without teeth, due to the use of soft prepared foods which our civilization has developed. If the weather continues to get warmer, we may find ourselves a race without hair, since the protection offered by it would no longer be necessary. Going to extremes, we may find ourselves a race without legs, dependent solely on mechanized vehicles. At the very least, we are losing our toes, which are no longer an aid to survival.

"Fanciful day dreams," the average reader scoffs. Sure, maybe superficially that's what they seem. But judging the future from the past, all these are within the realm of possible fulfillment. Dreams are the first flashes that set the currents of progress into motion. They are what have been back of all the great inventions and discoveries. The telephone, the radio and television, the jet-propelled aircraft, the artificial heart, and all the others. A hundred years ago, these hadn't even reached the dream stage—yet, somebody dared to think them, and today they are proven realities.

Today, the currents of human thought are moving in the direction of impossibles of even greater scope. When human thought becomes crystallized, it becomes an irresistible force to which the laws of Nature yield her secrets.

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There seemed no way out for Thorne—he had to finish the story without knowing the end

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By John McGreevey

Editor's Note: Here's a story by a writer who sold us a manuscript and then was never heard from again. Why? Perhaps you can find the answer in the pages of his story

"EARTH IS, at this very moment, being infiltrated by colonists from the farthest reaches of the Galaxy; colonists bent on the destruction of man and the advancement of their Galactic Empire."

Thorne Leathem stopped typing and stared at the sentence he had just written. That was his attention-getter. But was it enough? Hadn't the thesis of an Inter-Galactic infiltration been hashed and re-hashed hundreds of times? Could he hope to snare the interest of a reader with such an opening? Especially a reader who, in the course of a day's mail, might receive a dozen stories with openings depressingly similar.

He pushed back his chair and

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reached for a cigarette amid the litter on the table top.

A white bird in the black jaws of a wolf!

In the subdued light from the goose-neck lamp, that was the appearance the blank white of the paper gave in the maw of the rented typewriter.

Why, Thorne asked himself, was he dogged by such images? Why, in fact, had he brought himself to this impossible low? For he had to accept full responsibility. There was no one else to blame. Quite the contrary. Elaine and his mother had both tried in vain to show him the irrationality of his move.

But he had ignored their appeals and, even now looking back on it, he couldn't have told them why he refused to listen; why he seemed bent on self-destruction.

He drew deeply on the cigarette and called up the startled expression on Superintendent Fuller's face when he had announced that he was giving up his work with SIMCO. The man couldn't conceive of anyone's being so foolish. He, too, had added his protests and, as with the others, Thorne had turned a deaf ear.

"You don't seem to realize," Fuller had burbled, gesturing ineffectually with his fat little hands, "you don't seem to realize what you're doing, Leathem. In another year or two, you can be chief engineer at SIMCO. You're tossing away one of the finest jobs in the world."

And Thorne nodded agreement. He couldn't deny it. Hadn't he set his sights on that engineering job while he was still in the University? Hadn't he directed his every effort toward getting on at SIMCO—working to merit consideration? And now, when the coveted position was in sight, he had decided to chuck it.

"Is it someone on the staff who has offended you?"

Thorne could only shake his head.

"If it's more money . . ."

Again the negative head-shake.

It was nothing. Thorne couldn't even have said when the notion of quitting SIMCO had first struck him. One night when he went to bed, he was a man supremely well satisfied with his work and the prospects that the future held. The next morning he was determined to leave SIMCO.

And for what?

Nothing. He had no plans. He wasn't quitting because some other field held more attraction for him. He couldn't deny that his attitude was hopelessly illogical, and yet he was helpless to do other than resign.

That had been six months ago, and what had he accomplished in that half year? The blank sheet of white paper in the typewriter was his answer.

Nothing.

He rose and walked to the window. Elaine had been sympathetic at first. She had thought he was tired; needed a rest. She was loyal when all the others arched their eyebrows significantly. She was certain, she insisted, that somewhere in the back of his mind Thorne had a reason for his actions.

THAT WAS six months ago. Now, even Elaine's faith was wavering. And why shouldn't it? They had been engaged. In another year, if he had stayed at SIMCO, they would have married. As chief engineer, he could have given Elaine Winters the kind of home she deserved.

Often he had pictured that home and the two of them sharing it.

What sort of home could he give Elaine now? He couldn't provide adequate shelter for himself. This miserable room four flights up—a haven for all the stale cooking smells from the lower levels! He could hardly ask her to share this with him.

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Why? Why had he changed overnight? That was the unanswerable. What had been the motivation?

His mother was positive that he was ill. She had even made appointments for Thorne with her doctor, but he had refused to keep them. Was his refusal proof that his mother was wrong, or proof that she was right?

He stopped pacing and stared down again at the typewriter and the whiteness of the paper.

"Earth is, at this very moment, being infiltrated by colonists from the farthest reaches of the Galaxy; colonists bent on the destruction of man and the advancement of their Galactic Empire."

And this was the latest symptom of his delirium, this preoccupation with science fiction. It was as totally inexplicable as his resignation from SIMCO had been.

Until a few short weeks before, Thorne had been only dimly aware that there was such a thing as science fiction. Vaguely, he knew there were magazines, fan clubs—that many occupied themselves with idle speculation concerning other planets, even other solar systems; but it had never held his interest, even for a second. In fact, had he been called upon to name the planets in the Solar System, he couldn't have proceeded beyond Earth, Venus and Mars.

And then he had stopped at a magazine store for a pack of cigarettes. As he waited for a clerk, he had left his gaze drift to the magazine racks and there the metamorphosis began. Before he left the store, he had bought a copy of each science-fiction magazine offered.

IN THE weeks following, he was lost in the new worlds that he discovered between the often lurid covers of the magazines. New York in 1951 became less real to him than Venus in 2300 or the outer reaches of the Galaxy in 12,500. He marveled at the inventiveness of these Earth-bound writers who could in three or four sentences transport him twenty light-years through space.

With a now accustomed unexpectedness, he decided to write for these books. He was of a sudden obsessed with the determination to create his own world of the future; to set in print his own peculiar vision of things to come.

Accordingly, he rented the portable typewriter, bought a hundred sheets of paper and set to work. To work! Thus far, work had consisted largely of sitting and staring at the blank white paper in the machine.

Only now had he set down his first sentence, the first sentence of his first story. And now that it was written, he could only regard it with a strange mixture of satisfaction and distaste.

The arrangement of the words was in itself satisfying; and he was pleased to think that a man schooled only to be an engineer could so aptly express himself in a new medium.

And yet, in another way, the sentence was distasteful and he found himself wondering how he could go on with the story. Perhaps this catch-sentence was a dead end; a literary blind alley.

No. The seed was there in that sentence. It was ominous. It presaged conflict—destruction for all men—unless some force of great ingenuity could forestall the cunning infiltration.

Thorne reseated himself at his typewriter.

Unless some mortal learned of the infiltration from the outer edges, there could be no conflict. There must be a man who in some manner stumbled upon the terrible fact of the invasion. But how would a man learn of such a thing?

The typewriter keys grinned up at

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Thorne with idiot placidity. "How, indeed?" they seemed to ask.

Wait! If one could suppose a HOSTILE force from the outer edges of the Galaxy bent on man's destruction, why not a counter-agent determined to save the Galaxy and, incidentally, Earth from the menace of the power-crazed space pirates?

That was it! That was his answer. These two opposing forces, using Man as a battleground to decide the fate of the Universe.

Naturally, neither the destroyers nor their counter-agents could materialize on Earth. They would be forced to act through men. They would possess human beings and through them wage their bitter warfare.

CAUGHT UP in a kind of creative maelstrom, Thorne began to type feverishly. The conflict took shape and the blank pages gradually were filled with the words that recorded the conflict.

The destructive force was identified as Iyon, a dark planet far out in the Galaxy, inhabited by beings which had entity as energy rather than as matter. Slowly, inexorably, the Iyonites were eliminating from the Universe all colonies which differed from them. They fed, these energy-mites, on the destruction of cells.

Between the Iyonites and their ultimate goal stood the Lanns, who had discovered the plan of Iyon long before and had sought to thwart it, step by step.

Mars had been lost to the Iyonites and Earth was their present objective. They had perfected an especially effective method for disintegrating cellular life. As Iyon's strength on Earth increased, they would, in time, be able to annihilate humanity and leave Earth a lost and lonely planet like Mars.

But the Lanns were not without resources. Doggedly, they followed their ancient interstellar enemies onto the blue-green planet. Slowly, painstakingly, they attempted to alert Earthmen to the great peril. Of course, they were handicapped, for they could work only through men, and they found the minds of most men unreceptive, even hostile to their suggestions.

One man (Thorne decided to call him Gavin) proved most pliable, and through him one of the Lanns worked tirelessly to convince the Earthlings of the danger that surrounded them. In the face of public ridicule, constant humiliation, even danger to his life, Gavin devoted himself to a program of education.

The keys of Thorne's typewriter beat out a rhythmic tattoo as he put Gavin through ordeal after ordeal. In each case, when it would seem that Gavin was about to convince the world of the realness of its peril, an Iyon-dominated man would intervene and sabotage all the good that had been accomplished.

As he worked, Thorne became more and more immersed in the problem of Gavin and the skepticism of those around him who refused to believe that Earth could be threatened from outside. The reality of Thorne Leathem, ex-engineer, was lost in the hyper-reality of a Galactic conflict which used Earth's peoples as hapless chessmen.

HIS INTENSE preoccupation, plus the racket of the typewriter, combined to keep him from hearing Elaine when she first knocked. In fact, when he did at last become aware of the knocking and opened his door to discover her and the bespectacled man with her, he had the feeling that they had been standing patiently in the hall for some time.

Even though he knew he should be

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glad to see Elaine—grateful to her for taking the time to bother with him—he could not suppress a sense of irritation. It was as if she were distracting him from the really vital considerations, such as the story in his typewriter.

"I know you're surprised to see me," she was saying, as he ushered them in. "And I'm surprised to be here, Thorne, after the things that were said last time. But when I met Dr. Roeder, I just felt you had to see him, to talk with him."

Dr. Roeder! So that was the answer. Elaine had come to his mother's way of thinking and had brought this doctor to examine him, though no ordinary doctor as it quickly developed.

"Dr. Roeder specializes in...in nervous disorders and personality adjustments," Elaine explained. "I...I just happened to meet him, and when he heard about you, Thorne, he was very anxious to see you. I thought that maybe..." and her voice trailed away as the two men regarded each other.

Thorne took an immediate and intense dislike to Roeder. It was wholly illogical—had no rational basis—but that was now true of all his judgments, it seemed. Roeder was kindly, interested, sympathetic—and still, inexplicably, Thorne distrusted him.

After the preliminaries, the doctor attempted to search out Thorne's motives; but the answers he received became increasingly evasive. This was due in part to Thorne's growing dislike for the man, and in part to the fact that his motivation was obscure even to himself.

At last, after a particularly antagonistic reply from Thorne, Elaine cried out in exasperation: "Thorne, how can Dr. Roeder help you if you won't answer him honestly?"

"Who asked for his help? You're the one who decided that I needed help. I didn't petition this man to come here and probe into my mind. I'm perfectly happy."

EVEN AS he spoke, Thorne wondered how he could make such a positive declaration of happiness, especially as he saw the deep hurt grow in Elaine's eyes. Quickly, he looked away from her.

"In my opinion," the man called Roeder was saying, "you are not a well man, Mr. Leathem. You need careful attention. I happen to know of a sanatorium—a quiet place—but with an expert staff. A few weeks there and I believe you'd be a new man. Quite yourself again." The voice was so well modulated, so cautious. The things it said were so rational.

"No."

"Please, Thorne." Elaine crammed a whole world of entreaty into those two words. She was at his side, her small hand on his arm.

"Something has jarred you out of focus." Roeder was smiling—a secret, encouraging sort of smile. "We want to correct that."

"Thorne—Thorne, look at me."

He couldn't resist that plea, and so turned and looked down at her.

"Thorne, you loved me once. I still love you. I need you. I don't know what's happened, but I do know you're sick. I know that you've got to be helped. Listen to Dr. Roeder. Please."

Love. Yes, now that she spoke of it, he could remember a little of the love he had felt for her; the need he had known. But it seemed quite remote to him now. As if it had happened to someone else.

"I talked to Superintendent Fuller at SIMCO," she went on, taking his silence for acceptance. "He wants to give you another chance. He knows you've been ill. He promised me, Thorne, that whenever Dr. Roeder

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pronounced you well, you could come back."

She had worked it all out. Every detail was set. She and Dr. Roeder. Why did this bespectacled stranger with the soft voice suddenly assume such an important role in his life? And how could he explain the immediate dislike he had felt for the doctor?

The doctor! What was he up to now?

"What are you doing at my typewriter?"

Roeder jumped guiltily and backed off. "Doing? I was doing nothing. Miss Winters hadn't mentioned that you were a writer."

"You were reading what I had written."

Elaine was tugging at his arm. "Thorne, you mustn't speak to Dr. Roeder that way. He only wants to help you."

"He had no right to read that."

Roeder was shaking his head sadly. "Mr. Leathem, I'm afraid that you're a much sicker man than I imagined at first." He turned to Elaine. "It's imperative that he have immediate shock treatment if we're to save him at all."

Thorne stood now between the doctor and the typewriter. "Get out," he ordered.

Elaine took a step toward him. "You must come with us, dear."

"No!"

The violence of his reaction startled her, and she moved to Roeder's side.

"I'm not going with you, now or ever. I don't need shock treatments or treatments of any other kind from your Doctor Roeder. I'm perfectly all right. I know what I'm doing."

Roeder smiled winningly. "Why not come with us now, quietly? It would be so much simpler."

Thorne fought for self-possession. "Get out. I'll throw you out if I have to."

Again, Elaine would have moved to him, but Roeder gently drew her toward the door. "It's useless," he murmured. "There's nothing you can do now."

HE STOOD and watched Roeder lead Elaine through the door. She was sobbing softly as they disappeared into the hall and the latch clicked after them.

Quickly, Thorne crossed and locked the door. He leaned against it for a moment, weakened as if by some great exertion. It was as though he had faced a great danger and had only narrowly escaped death.

One thing was certain. He must move. Roeder would be back and next time, Thorne knew, the doctor would come alone.

In five minutes' time, he had collected his few possessions, stuffed the typescript into the portable case, snapped off his light and stepped out into the dark. Had a curious bystander asked him why he was abandoning his flat, he could not have given a reason for it. He knew only that the chase had begun and that he must play the role of the pursued.

He found another room in a remote and cheerless section of the city and turned once more to his story. Putting the words to the paper seemed to free him momentarily, at least, from the apprehension he had felt for his own safety.

He wrote with fanatic intensity, begrudging even a few minutes' time spent away from the typewriter to eat. The urgency he felt increased as the story of the Galactic conflict took shape.

Only Gavin stood between Earth and domination from Iyon. But, at last, the Lann-entity which possessed Gavin managed to show him how to identify the Earthmen who were Iyon-

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puppets. This identifying process proved the decisive factor in saving Earth and the Galaxy.

The End.

Thorne typed those words on the final page and sank back in utter exhaustion. It was as if he had poured every ounce of energy into the job now finished. He was tired in a way he had never before experienced; utterly drained of all vitality.

After a day's rest, he realized that the project was not yet complete. He must market his manuscript. He must find an editor who would buy his story and print it.

HE TYPED up the final draft, and as he copied, he was continually amazed by his own phrasings which seemed alien and apart. The narrative might have been the work of another, and for the most part he did not even remember the creative processes that had produced it.

Somehow, despite his inexperience, he had managed to convey the dreadful urgency of the danger that threatened Earth. In his words, he had caught the reality of that peril and had pointed up the suicidal obtuseness of men who refused to believe that such a danger might exist. The story moved from episode to episode with the relentless flow of a historical narrative rather than a work of fiction.

The copying finished, he mailed it out to a magazine that had been one of his favorites as a reader. Nothing to do then but wait and see whether or not he could win acceptance.

But while he waited, he learned that Elaine and Roeder were again on his trail. There was nothing to do but move, and yet how could he move and not leave a forwarding address? And if he left a forwarding address, Roeder would find him.

On the day that he had decided to move and forget the manuscript, it was returned with a polite note of rejection.

Dear Mr. Leathem: Thanks for letting us see your story. While your theme is a sound one, you have made it a bit too simple here for suspense, and your development is a trifle overpat. Better luck with your next.

He sent the story out again, this time with a General Delivery return address, and moved to another rooming house.

He felt no desire to write. The mental and physical exhaustion which had resulted from his intense preoccupation with the first story seemed to hang on. He was content to eat, to sleep and to check regularly with General Delivery.

The story came back.

Dear Mr. Leathem: I am sorry to tell you that we are overstocked and not buying. This situation should prevail for the next few months. In the meantime, luck with this story. There's a lot of good stuff in it.

He sent it out again and waited.

It came back.

And again. And again. And again.

Nice writing, but an overworked idea.

Sound notion, but hackneyed approach.

Try us again. This one was close.

He returned the rented typewriter. Twice, he narrowly avoided meeting Dr. Roeder. He moved again. Seldom did he stay on one spot more than two or three nights. The only constant in his life was his visits to the General Delivery window.

And then, he got the note from *FANTASTIC ADVENTURES.*

Dear Mr. Leathem: We are much impressed with your recently submitted novelette and would like to meet with you Wednesday evening at 8 to discuss terms. Bring along any extra copies you have. (Signed) *Leo Stoneman.*

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THE QUEST was ended. He had found a publisher.

FANTASTIC ADVENTURES was an established magazine in the science-fiction fantasy field, a top-favorite with those who demanded good writing, believable characterizations, reasonably sound science, and intriguing fantasy.

The building which housed the offices of *FANTASTIC ADVENTURES* was deserted when Thorne arrived Wednesday evening a little before eight. The elevator carried him swiftly to the ninth floor and deposited him in the thick carpeting of the magazine's foyer.

The interior design of the editorial rooms was patently influenced by the subject matter of the magazine. There was much glass and chrome, a feeling of spaciousness. A few dim lights burned, but Thorne saw no one.

He walked slowly down the rows of deserted desks. Everywhere were piles of manuscript. He tried to imagine the arrival of his own story into these offices and its progress from reader to reader, until at last it reached the desk of Leo Stoneman.

The sound of someone clearing his throat terminated these reveries abruptly. Silhouetted in an open office doorway stood a large man in his early forties. He was regarding Thorne with a most benign smile.

"You must be Thorne Leathem," he said, and extended his hand.

Thorne accepted the firm hand grip. "And you're Mr. Stoneman?"

"That's right. Come in. Come in. I hope this hour didn't inconvenience you, but I did want a chance to really talk with you, Mr. Leathem, and I know what a madhouse this place can be during the day, especially when we're crowding a deadline. I see you brought your extra copy of the story. Good. I'll take it. Sit down." He gestured to a deceptively comfortable chair near his desk and Thorne automatically complied.

Stoneman stood behind the highly polished desk that dominated the room and smiled across it at Thorne. "I feel that FANTASTIC ADVENTURES has discovered a great new science fiction writer in you, Mr. Leathem," he confided. "I can't tell you how excited I was when I read your story." He tapped a manuscript that lay before him, and Thorne recognized his brain child.

"I'm glad someone else likes it," Thorne said, and wondered why Stoneman's smile made him feel vaguely uncomfortable. Why, too, did he feel that he knew the editor? What was it that made the man seem familiar?

Stoneman seated himself. "This is, you say in your note, your first science fiction attempt, and yet you write with such conviction; such urgency." He leaned a little forward and laughed. "It's almost as if you were reporting facts rather than creating fictions."

THORNE stirred in the easy chair. Something was wrong. Why did he feel apprehensive? What was there about this man? What identification eluded him?

Stoneman had picked up the typescript and was thumbing through it as he spoke. "It's not your theme that's so arresting. In fact, this inter-Galactic menace has been rather overworked. But your treatment is what raises it above the ordinary. Somehow, you've managed to make it sound completely plausible. Completely. Reading these pages, one can think that there are at this moment, at large in the world, energy-entities who control human puppets. Make those puppets do their bidding."

It was coming to Thorne now. The resemblance. Stoneman resembled another man he had met only recently.

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But who was it?

"And on the other side, beneficent entities from outer space struggling to awaken man to his imminent peril. Very convincingly written, Mr. Leathem." Stoneman put the typescript down and looked very directly at Thorne. "Do you know the one touch that persuaded me I must meet with you?"

Thorne was on the edge of his chair now. Danger was a living thing in the room. There was no question of it. He stared at the man behind the desk. "One thing that persuaded you?"

Stoneman nodded. "The formula for identifying a human being who is controlled by an Iyon-entity. You gave that formula so clearly that anyone could understand it."

And Thorne knew. Stoneman resembled Dr. Roeder. And what was the thing that made the two appear similar? Each man completely met all the qualifications for an Iyon-dominated personality.

Thorne was on his feet. "It's true. All of it's true. That's why I changed. The Lanns were using me, using me to try to warn Earth."

Stone was smiling, a little sadly. "Such a pity. I'm sure," he said, "that you were an excellent engineer."

Thorne edged toward the door. "That's why you sent for me tonight. You knew when you read my manuscript."

"Don't try to escape. It's useless." Stoneman touched the typescript again. "You've written it all here. You know that we've mastered cellular disintegration. There won't be a trace left of Thorne Leathem. Not a trace."

Thorne stared at the smiling face. "It's all true... And now no one will know." Stoneman's face blurred suddenly. The entire room seemed to vibrate. There was the sound of a great thunder in Thorne's ears and a blinding light in his eyes.

And then—there was nothing.

* * *

Excerpt from "The Reader's Page" —letter column in the December issue of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES:

Dear Ed.: This is the old booster from Wooster, but all I can say this time is: Phew! A garland of over-ripe scallions to ye and ye old idiotorial staff for paying a BEM named Thorne Leathem good money for last Ish's "The Catspaw". Energy-entities from outer space yet! And Mr. L's description of said entities in human form sounds exactly like my mother-in-law. Looks to me as if the much-hosannahed "adult" of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES is being *adult*erated! No wonder Leathem disappeared after penning that opera! A few more like that, ed., and our fan club will see to it that you disappear, too. Imaginative, yes...but let's keep 'em believable. When Leathem gets back from outer space, tell him to go jump on an energy-entity. (signed) The Booster from Wooster. P. S. The covers are getting better!

We're sorry "The Catspaw" didn't go over with you, Mr. Wooster. Most of the readers rated it first in the issue—largely because, as they put it, it seemed so believable....

Actually, it would seem the author is carrying the "believable" element of the matter much too far. We have yet to meet him personally, as the manuscript for his story was lying on our desk one morning when we arrived at the office. Since no letter accompanied it and there was no return address shown, a check in payment is still being held here for him.

We did notice something strange about the manuscript itself: The first page had a peculiar brownish cast to it, as though slightly seared, or singed, by some sort of heat. .....Ed

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THE SECRET OF JOHN MARSH

By

William P. McGivern

TROUBLE, John Marsh thought, as he came down the stairs that morning and saw his wife in the dining room. Irene didn't join him for breakfast unless she had a reason—and such reasons usually meant trouble.

For an instant, he thought of his secret, as he usually did when life got unpleasant, and then, feeling slightly better, he walked into the room.

"Good morning," he said, and kissed her on the cheek.

"Good morning, John," she said. She didn't withdraw from him, but he always got the impression that she might at any moment. It was something about the way she held her shoulders, he had decided a long time ago.

He sat down facing her and spread his napkin. "Looks like a nice day," he said.

"Yes."

The early Spring sunlight that streamed through the windows was very flattering to his wife's blonde loveliness. She was a slim, petite woman

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Sometimes a wife can get on your nerves.
But John Marsh knew how he could get away.
What he didn't know was how to get back . . .

He heard the shattering of his dreams echoed in her fiendish laughter

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with deep violet eyes and features as delicately wrought as a fine work of art. Her blue silk house coat was knotted snugly about her slender waist, and her make-up and hair were in perfect order. John Marsh had never seen her mussed up or disarranged in the nine years of their marriage. She was always cool, immaculate, and self-controlled and, while she'd never said so, he knew that she was faintly contemptuous of people who let themselves be dominated by passionate emotions. They had no children . . . .

"Coffee?" she asked.

"Yes, dear."

He watched her as she poured, noting with objective interest the turn of her wrist and the way she sat in her chair, erect and yet graceful.

A small resentment tugged at him. She did very little but take care of her own body, so it wasn't surprising that she was always such a picture of charm. The money she spent every week on beauty care and massages would have fed a normal family for the same length of time.

"John, there's something I wish to talk to you about," she said, as he took the cup of coffee from her hand.

"Yes, dear?" Here it came.

"The Prescotts have a gardener this year," she said.

THE PRESCOTTS lived across the street from them in the same sort of smart suburban home. They seemed to be pleasant people. Jim Prescott was in banking.

"Yes?" he said, glancing inquiringly at his wife.

"Well, don't you see? You simply can't take care of the lawn yourself this summer."

"But, dear, I enjoy taking care of the lawn. It's the only exercise I get."

"That's because you have that odd idea about golf."

John was accustomed to his wife's truly spectacular conversational agility, and the gazelle-like speed with which she could dodge the point of an argument. He sighed and put down his fork. "I don't play golf, dear, because I can't afford greens fees and locker room expenses every week."

"You never think of me. How can I live here at all if everyone knows you have to slave over your own yard just to save a few pennies?"

John Marsh began his breakfast and let his wife continue talking. He knew there was no point in the argument. Irene would win, as she always did, because John didn't care enough to put up a fight. Something kept him going through the motions of being a dutiful husband, but his heart wasn't in it.

Perhaps it was because of his secret, which even his wife, for all her sharp-eyed acumen, hadn't guessed. The secret was downstairs in his workshop, securely protected by a locked door at all times. John turned his mind to it at times like this when his wife was goading him on toward some pointless extravagance, or when life was sterile and unrewarding. The secret was his sanctuary.

"I have to be running along," he said.

"And you'll see about the gardener?"

"Yes, dear."

His day was exacting and tiring. He worked for an advertising firm, as an account executive, and that morning there were copy conferences, then lunch with a petulant client, and finally a number of niggling details to take care of in the afternoon. By the time he caught his train that evening, he was too tired to read the paper. He sat looking out the window and wondering why all human beings seemed to get caught in this eternal rat race. It was run, run, run all the

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time, and in the end you wound up pretty much where you'd started.

The maid let him in and told him that Mrs. Marsh had phoned to say she was staying at the club for dinner. There was a bridge tournament with play scheduled for later in the evening.

AFTER HIS own solitary dinner, John smoked a cigar and glanced through the paper. He was feeling better now. The house was quiet, and soon he'd change into his work clothes, light his pipe and go downstairs.

But he was wearier than he thought. He closed his eyes for a second and promptly fell asleep. The sound of a key in the front door waked him, and when he looked up, he saw Irene letting herself in. She came into the living room and put her mink jacket neatly across the arm of a chair. Smiling impersonally at him she sat down.

"Busy day?"

"So-so."

"Did you see about the gardener?"

That had slipped his mind. "No, but I'll take care of it tomorrow."

"I hope you're not thinking I'll forget about it," she said.

He knew from the faintly blurred quality of her voice that she'd been drinking. That had been happening regularly of late. He could tell from the bar bills from the club.

"No, I'm sure you wouldn't," he said. He glanced at his watch, saw that it was ten-thirty and felt cheated. The time he might have spent in the workshop was wasted. But perhaps he could salvage an hour or so.

"I think I'll putter around the workshop a bit before I turn in," he said.

"Don't be late," she said absently. She had picked up the paper and was reading it; but suddenly she paused and looked at him with an odd expression. "What are you working on down there? It must be fascinating."

He smiled; but his heart was hammering loudly. She must never learn of his secret. The thought of sharing that with her was somehow obscene.

"Just tinkering," he said.

"But you must tinker with something."

"It's nothing you'd be interested in."

"I suppose," she said, seeming to lose interest. "Things mechanical leave me rather cold."

He watched her as she skimmed the news, her selfish but exquisite little face blandly contented. Yes, he thought, mechanical things aren't the only ones that leave you cold. Anything warm or human or beautiful also leaves you cold. Nothing excites you but the pleasure of pampering and feeding your smooth greedy body.

John wondered at his sudden resentment and decided that her attempt to pry into his workshop had caused this reaction. Now that she had subtly threatened his secret, he could feel all his subconscious anger at her foaming to the surface of his mind.

"I thought you were going downstairs," she said, turning a page.

"I am," he stood up. "See you in the morning."

"Night."

HE WENT into the dark kitchen, opened the door to the basement and went downstairs. His workshop door was constructed of heavy timber with special locks on both sides. He opened it now, snapped on the powerful overhead light and closed the door behind him. But didn't lock it because he didn't intend to work very long.

Almost immediately, he began to feel better.

The room was small, clean, comfortable, without windows, but with a tiny blower fan connected with an

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air-duct to keep the atmosphere fresh. There was a long work-bench, equipped with vises, lathes, and drills, a shelf of books against one wall, and chests of fine, well-oiled tools against another.

John sat on a stool before the work bench and gazed in contentment upon the slender shining object which was mounted there on a special stand. This was his secret, his symbol of peace and harmony.

He had worked on it for several years now, shaping it with his heart and mind, as well as with his hands. And yet, despite the honesty and intensity of his effort, he knew he could hardly hope to succeed, and that if people knew what he was doing, they would probably call him a fool.

For John Marsh was building a space ship.

A model, of course, it was about two feet long and six inches wide, with a graceful, bullet-shaped body, and fins that flared out excitingly beyond the jet nacelles that bulged from the tail.

John Marsh was literally in love with space. The books on his shelves, the well-worn works of Einstein and Whitehead, had taught him something of its nature; but his love was pure and ideal, independent of knowledge of its object.

He loved the idea of space. Sometimes when he retreated from Irene, he could almost feel that he was in space, that he had joined its vastness, was part of its peace and harmony.

The theories of the great scientists weren't completely clear to him, but he read and reread their books, taking from their vaulting imaginations the same pleasure a music-lover might find in Beethoven or Bach.

And this was the secret of John Marsh. He loved the thought of the vast singing silences of space, and the harmony of planets and stars wheeling in their classic, inevitable patterns, locked together forever by the invisible bonds of gravity.

His first love had been astronomy, then had come physics, and eventually the daring theories of the greatest scientists. Finally, in an attempt to get closer to the thing he loved, he began to build a model space ship. He had dug into the subject of metals, the stresses likely to be produced by light-like speeds, and then, forced on inevitably by the demands of his dream, he had studied meteor and asteroid patterns, the natures of absolute zero and the Heaviside layer, until he felt he was ready to build his ship. He didn't care about the time, of course.

NOW, THE time to test his ship was almost at hand. It could navigate space, John felt in his heart. And its radio signal would tell him what it encountered out in the great reaches where his own heart longed to live.

He had spent a great deal of time choosing the destination. Finally, he had selected a tiny area of Venus, which his investigation led him to think was salubrious and pleasant. Because, if this model worked, John Marsh was going to build a great ship, one that would carry him—

Suddenly, he felt a draft on his neck. Turning, he saw Irene standing in the open doorway behind him, a highball glass in her hand. He tried to hide the space ship with his body, but she had already seen it.

"Goodness, what's that?" she said.

He tried to hold back his anger. "Something I'm building," he said.

"Well, I can see that. It looks like one of those ships you see in science-fiction magazines." She laughed. "Is it a space ship, John?"

"Yes, it's the model of a space ship," he said slowly.

"Oh, John," she laughed. She

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wandered to the bookshelf and began reading the titles aloud in gently mocking accents. "My, how smart you are," she said. "I had no idea you were interested in such things."

"No, you wouldn't," he said.

She studied him thoughtfully. "You know, John, sometimes when I'm talking with you, I've noticed that you seem to...drift off in an odd way. It's worried me. But now I think I understand."

"What do you understand?" He felt a sensation of panic.

"You retreat from me, don't you, John? Your mind runs off and hides in this little room, with this toy ship and the books." Her smile was triumphant. "Isn't that it?"

Nothing could be the same now, he knew. He couldn't come here again for peace and solitude. Not after this.

"Yes, that's right."

She moved slowly to the door, smiling at him. "I'll know how to fix that in the future, of course. I'll just laugh at you, my dear. I hardly think you'll be able to dream about these toys while I'm laughing at you."

"No, I probably won't."

"Good night then, John. Do see about the gardener first thing in the morning, please."

He sat still, staring at the clean floor, and listening to her high heels picking their way carefully through the basement, and then ascending the stairs to the kitchen. He heard her steps above him crossing the dining room floor, and they died away as she went up to her room.

John Marsh locked the door of his workshop and turned to his space ship and began working with controlled and desperate speed. He hardly knew what was driving him, or what he wanted; but he had to do what he was doing. He had loved space too long to have it laughed at, and he felt in some half-insane fashion that the gods of space wouldn't let him down.

He worked on furiously until something quite amazing happened....

THE YOUNG officer from the Missing Persons Bureau was politely brisk. "Now, Mrs. Marsh, tell me what led up to your husband's... er...desertion."

Irene Marsh had changed subtly in the week since her husband had disappeared. The quality of well-lubricated composure that had been her trademark was wearing a trifle thin. Her hair was not quite so well-cared for and there was a run in her stocking. Also, a tiny muscle was twitching in her cheek.

"He did it to spite me," she said, pacing the floor of the living room, her hands clasped tightly together. "He ran out, just to make me suffer. We haven't a penny. Creditors are starting to hound me, do you hear? Me! I've got to sell this house, my car, and I've been posted at the club. He—"

"Well, that's not our concern, of course," the officer said.

"My lawyer told me to go to work!" Irene cried.

"When did you see your husband last?" the officer asked brusquely.

"Just a week ago tonight. I left him in his workshop. The next morning, his bed hadn't been slept in, so the maid and I went downstairs and forced the door of his workroom. It was empty, of course. He's run out on me for spite."

"You've heard nothing from him?"

"No."

"You've talked to the people he worked for?"

"Yes, they don't know a thing."

The officer frowned at his notes, then glanced at her with raised eyebrows. "Just a second. You said that you forced the door of his workroom.

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You mean it was locked from the inside?"

"Why, yes, of course."

"Then how did he get outside?"

THE MUSCLE in Irene's cheek began to twitch at a slightly accelerated pace. "I never—"

"I'd better have a look at that room," the officer said.

John Marsh's workshop was silent and empty. The books stood in their accustomed places, the tools gleamed with oil.

The officer poked around, then shrugged. "No way out except through that one door. And you insist it was locked on the inside?"

"Yes, we had to break the lock," Irene whispered.

She stared about the room and suddenly put both hands to her mouth to stifle a scream.

"What is it?" the officer said in alarm.

"Oh!" Irene sobbed.

She sobbed because she knew. She knew with her unerring feminine instinct what had happened. She knew that John Marsh had got away to a place she couldn't follow him.

Because the shining model space ship was gone.

THE END

THE ORIGIN OF WORDS

By Merritt Linn

TRACING THE origin of the newer words of our language is a simple matter, since they were called into being simply to express ideas. It is easy, too, to trace the origin of most of the words in common use today, to the parent languages, because they also were called into being to express the ideas of the objects and actions which they represent.

Some examples: Evolution is a word having a Latin origin. The prefix "e" in Latin means "out". "Volvo" means "to roll" or "to unfold". Thus, the word "evolution"—"to roll out" or "to unfold".

The English word "book" probably comes from the Anglo-Saxon word "boc", meaning a "beech", a species of tree with a smooth white bark about a quarter of an inch thick. Tablets made from the bark of the beech tree were one of the substances on which written characters were inscribed by some of the ancient writers. This material was desirable, since the characters could be easily carved on the bark of this tree with a sharp or pointed instrument and they were durable and well preserved. We have, even today, in this country, living beech trees upon whose bark names were carved more than fifty years ago and which can still be read.

The word "library" comes from the Latin word "liber" which means the inner bark or rind of a tree used for paper. Our word "paper" comes from the papyrus plant from which the papyri rolls of ancient times were made and upon which most of the ancient books affecting our civilization were written.

LET'S HAVE SOME MUSIC . . .

By E. Bruce Yaches

THE STRING instruments of today are actually only an evolved form of the vibration of the bowstring. When primitive man discovered there was a sound harmony in his bowstring, he probably tied on another string, bent the bow still more and tied on other strings until he produced what we know today as the harp—as evidenced by ancient drawings of the harp.

The wind instruments of today are the evolved forms of the first primitive horn used by primitive man, which he took from some animal. The principle of blowing through a horn or hollow tube to produce sound hasn't changed, but the forms have changed many times over.

The drum is the simplest of all instruments, and at the same time it is the oldest. Every savage tribe on earth makes use of the drum in its ceremonial rites. In HISTORY OF MUSIC, Rowbotham says: "Never in the musical history of mankind is the lyre stage found to precede the pipe stage, nor the pipe stage to precede the drum stage. That this should be the order of development seems natural if we consider the mechanical complexity of the instruments themselves. The drum is evidently the simplest of all; the pipe is more complex than the drum; but the lyre, which consists of strings bound around pegs and strung on a frame, is the most complex of all." Hence, the drum has probably evolved the least of all musical instruments. With a few changes, it represents the dried skin stretched over some hollow object, as prehistoric man first made use of it.

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WHERE ARE WE GOING?

By William Karney

THE GREATEST problem that faces civilization is the destiny of the human race. Evolution has brought the human race to its present state of existence, and the processes of evolution will determine its destiny. Up to now, the greatest thing evolution has accomplished is the creation of a being endowed with the power of understanding the processes of his own creation. Its highest purpose is to make all these creatures happy, healthy and helpful, and to coordinate their lives in harmony so that they procreate their own species.

All life developed from one life cell which contained all the dormant powers of all succeeding life. Not only the history of the past, but all of the future, is contained in each human life cell. It is only recently that Man has begun to learn something of the laws of heredity, and this knowledge will undoubtedly determine the destiny of the human race.

During the past seventy-five years, there has been a great increase in the span of human life. Some noted medical authorities now assert that this span may be extended to a period of two hundred years or more.

Civilization is on the verge of a Chemical Age where synthetic foods and other synthetic articles will be the rule. Through the processes of chemistry, life-sustaining foods for humans will undoubtedly be able to be extracted from the same grasses and weeds which today feed the animals. Future generations will be eating foods and wearing clothing made from substances about which we today know little or nothing. They will probably look upon us as an age of wasters.

Human thinking will bring about many changes in the future, just as it has done in the past. The struggle for existence will continue. What Nature has done for us and our ancestors, chemistry and the machine will do for future generations.

A PAPER FOR YOUR THOUGHTS . . .

By Sandy Miller

THE PAPYRUS plant from which was made the paper upon which early man recorded the history of his time, grew in the swamp or marsh lands of Egypt, although it has long since been extinct in those regions. It is now found only in Sicily and along the upper Nile.

It grew in clusters of eight or ten pithy stocks coming from one root, and it attained a height of from three to ten feet. Its stocks were triangular in shape, and were about four inches thick at their lower end.

The uses of this plant were many: The manufacture of baskets, boxes, boats, ropes, sails, awnings, matting. Its roots were dried and used for fuel. The poorer Egyptians boiled the pith of the plant and used it as food. But the most important use of the papyrus plant was for the manufacture of a type of paper that, after 5,000 years, still exists with its original record traced thereon.

This primitive paper was made by cutting the pith of the stocks into strips which were placed side by side on a flat, smooth surface. A second layer was placed at right angles to the first, over the layers thus formed. The whole thing was then pressed, dried, and smoothed. The natural gum of the strips glued them tightly together. The sheets were white when new, but turned brown with age just like the paper of today. The average lengths of these sheets were from nine to fifteen inches, average widths from six to nine inches, although in some cases they were as much as seventeen inches in width.

The finest papyri are found in the "Book of the Dead" where the sheets are fifteen inches wide. Just as paper is prepared and cut today, so these sheets were doubtless constructed to meet the conditions of trade. The sheets of papyri were often joined to make rolls which ran in length from a few feet to more than one hundred feet. The rolls used by the Greeks seldom were more than thirty feet in length, while some of the Egyptian manuscripts were more than one hundred feet long. They were wound on cylinders of wood or ivory in the same fashion as our window shades are today.

In THE STORY OF THE ALPHABET, Edward Clodd writes: "The earliest known specimen of hieratic writing is a papyrus containing chronicles of the reign of King Asa, whose date, according to a moderate estimate of Egyptian chronology, is about 3580 B.C."

Papyrus paper was in general use in Egypt, Greece, Rome and other Mediterranean countries covering a period of more that 4000 years. Its use continued in Greece until about the year 670 A.D. During the last few centuries of its use, it was no longer joined or made into rolls, but kept in sheets much the same as sheet music today.

What a heritage these records are to us today! We know that man was able to read and write 8,000 years ago. And many of his thoughts have been handed down to us through characters inscribed on a paper made more than 5000 years ago. This cherished history is invaluable in our thinking today.

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DARK BENEDICTION

Her beauty and her nearness tortured Paul, but he mustn't allow her to touch him!

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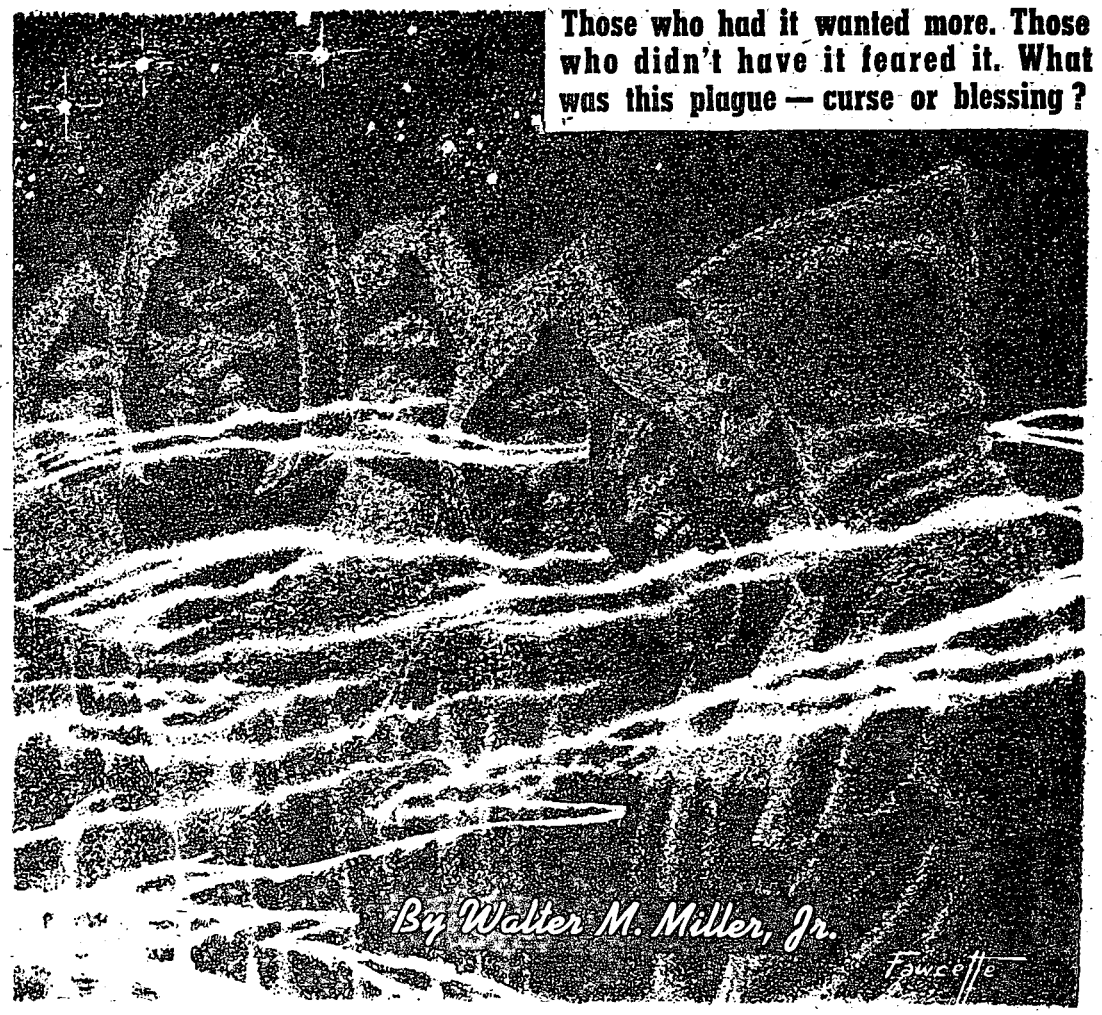
Those who had it wanted more. Those who didn't have it feared it. What was this plague — curse or blessing?



ALWAYS fearful of being set upon during the night, Paul slept uneasily despite his weariness from the long trek southward. When dawn broke, he rolled out of his blankets and found himself still stiff with fatigue. He kicked dirt over the remains of the campfire and breakfasted on a tough forequarter of cold boiled rabbit which he washed down with a swallow of earthy-tasting ditchwater. Then he buckled the cartridge belt about his waist, leaped the ditch, and climbed the embankment to the trafficless four-lane highway whose pavement was scattered with blown leaves and unsightly debris dropped by a long-departed throng of refugees whose only wish had been to escape from one another. Paul, with characteristic independence, had decided to go where the crowds had been the thickest—to the cities—on the theory that they would now be deserted, and therefore non-contagious.

The fog lay heavy over the silent land, and for a moment he paused groping for cognizance of direction. Then he saw the stalled car on the

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opposite shoulder of the road—a late model convertible, but rusted, flat-tired, with last year's license plates, and most certainly out of fuel. It had obviously been deserted by its owner during the exodus, and he trusted in its northward heading as he would have trusted the reading of a compass. He turned right and moved south on the empty highway. Somewhere just ahead in the gray vapor lay the outskirts of Houston. He had seen the high skyline before the setting of yesterday's sun, and knew that his journey would soon be drawing to a close.

Occasionally he passed a deserted cottage or a burned-out roadside tavern, but he did not pause to scrounge for food. The exodus would have stripped such buildings clean. Pickings should be better in the heart of the metropolitan area, he thought—where the hysteria had swept humanity away quickly.

Suddenly Paul froze on the highway, listening to the fog. Footsteps in the distance—footsteps and a voice singing an absent-minded ditty to itself. No other sounds penetrated the sepulchral silence which once had growled with the life of a great city. Anxiety caught at him with clammy hands. An old man's voice it was—crackling and tuneless. Paul groped for his holster and brought out the revolver he had taken from a deserted police station.

"Stop where you are, dermie!" he bellowed at the fog. "I'm armed."

THE FOOTSTEPS and the singing stopped. Paul strained his eyes to penetrate the swirling mist-shroud. After a moment, the oldster answered: "Sure foggy, ain't it, sonny? Can't see ya. Better come a little closer. I ain't no dermie."

Loathing choked in Paul's throat. "The hell you're not. Nobody else'd be crazy enough to sing. Get off the road! I'm going south, and if I see you I'll shoot. Now move!"

"Sure, sonny. I'll move. But I'm no dermie. I was just singing to keep myself company. I'm past caring about the plague. I'm heading north, where there's people, and if some dermie hears me a'singing...why, I'll tell him t'come jine in. What's the good o' being healthy if yer alone?"

While the old man spoke, Paul heard his sloshing across the ditch and climbing through the brush. Doubt assailed him. Maybe the old crank wasn't a dermie. An ordinary plague-victim would have whimpered and pleaded for satisfaction of his strange craving—the laying-on of hands, the feel of healthy skin beneath moist gray palms. Nevertheless, Paul meant to take no chances with the oldster.

"Stay back in the brush while I walk past!" he called.

"Okay, sonny. You go right by. I ain't gonna touch you. You aiming to scrounge in Houston?"

Paul began to advance. "Yeah, I figure people got out so fast that they must have left plenty of canned goods and stuff behind."

"Mmmm, there's a mite here and there," said the cracked voice in a tone that implied understatement. "Course now, you ain't the first to figure that way, y'know."

Paul slacked his pace, frowning. "You mean...a lot of people are coming back?"

"Mmmm, no—not a lot. But you'll bump into people every day or two. Ain't my kind o' folks. Rough characters, mostly—don't take chances, either. They'll shoot first, then look to see if you was a dermie. Don't never come busting out of a doorway without taking a peek at the street first. And if two people come around a corner in opposite directions, some-

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body's gonna die. The few that's there is trigger happy. Just thought I'd warn ya."

"Thanks."

"D'mention it. Been good t'hear a body's voice again, tho I can't see ye."

Paul moved on until he was fifty paces past the voice. Then he stopped and turned. "Okay, you can get back on the road now. Start walking north. Scuff your feet until you're out of earshot."

"Taking no chances, are ye?" said the old man as he waded the ditch. "All right, sonny." The sound of his footsteps hesitated on the pavement. "A word of advice—your best scrounging'll be around the warehouses. Most of the stores are picked clean. Good luck!"

PAUL STOOD listening to the shuffling feet recede northward. When they became inaudible, he turned to continue his journey. The meeting had depressed him, reminded him of the animal-level to which he and others like him had sunk. The oldster was obviously healthy; but Paul had been chased by three dermies in as many days. And the thought of being trapped by a band of them in the fog left him unnerved. Once he had seen a pair of the grinning, maddened compulsives seize a screaming young child while each of them took turns caressing the youngster's arms and face with the gray and slippery hands that spelled certain contraction of the disease—if disease it was. The dark pall of neuroderm was unlike any illness that Earth had ever seen.

The victim became the eager ally of the sickness that gripped him. Caught in its demonaic madness, the stricken human searched hungrily for healthy comrades, then set upon them with no other purpose than to paw at the clean skin and praise the virtues of the blind compulsion that drove him to do so. One touch, and infection was insured. It was as if a third of humanity had become night-prowling maniacs, lurking in the shadows to seize the unwary, working in bands to trap the unarmed wanderer. And two thirds of humanity found itself fleeing in horror from the mania, seeking the frigid northern climates where, according to rumor, the disease was less infectious. The normal functioning of civilization had been dropped like a hot potato within six months after the first alarm. When the man at the next lathe might be hiding gray discolorations beneath his shirt, industrial society was no place for humanity.

RUMOR connected the onslaught of the plague with an unpredicted swarm of meteorites which had brightened the sky one October evening two weeks before the first case was discovered. The first case was, in fact, a machinist who had found one of the celestial cannon-balls, handled it, weighed it, estimated its volume by fluid-displacement, then cut into it on his lathe because its low density suggested that it might be hollow. He claimed to have found a pocket of frozen jelly, still rigid from deep-space, although the outer shell had been heated white-hot by atmospheric friction. He said he let the jelly thaw, then fed it to his cat because it had an unpleasant fishy odor. Shortly thereafter, the cat disappeared.

Other meteorites had been discovered and similiarly treated by university staffs before there was any reason to blame them for the plague. Paul, who had been an engineering student at Texas U at the time of the incident, had heard it said that the missiles were purposefully manufactured by paties unknown, that the jelly contained micro-organisms which

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under the microscope suggested a cross between a sperm-cell (because of a similar tail) and a Pacini Corpuscle (because of a marked resemblance to nerve tissue in sub-cellular detail).

When the meteorites were connected with the new and mushrooming disease, some people started a panic by theorizing that the meteor-swarm was a pre-invasion artillery attack by some space-horde lurking beyond telescope-range, and waiting for their biological bombardment to wreck civilization before they moved in upon Earth. The government had immediately labeled all investigations "top-secret", and Paul had heard no news since the initial speculations. Indeed, the government might have explained the whole thing and proclaimed it to the country for all he knew. One thing was certain: the country had not heard. It no longer possessed channels of communication.

Paul thought that if any such invaders were coming, they would have already arrived—months ago. Civilization was not truly wrecked; it had simply been discarded during the crazed flight of the individual away from the herd. Industry lay idle and unmanned, but still intact. Man was fleeing from Man. Fear had destroyed the integration of his society, and had left him powerless before any hypothetical invaders. Earth was ripe for plucking, but it remained unplucked and withering. Paul, therefore, discarded the invasion-hypothesis, and searched for nothing new to replace it. He accepted the fact of his own existence in the midst of chaos, and sought to protect that existence as best he could. It proved to be a full-time job, with no spare time for theorizing.

Life was a rabbit scurrying over a hill. Life was a warm blanket, and a secluded sleeping place. Life was ditchwater, and an unbloated can of corned beef, and a suit of clothing looted from a deserted cottage. Life, above all else, was an avoidance of other human beings. For no dermie had the grace to cry "unclean!" to the unsuspecting. If the dermie's discolorations were still in the concealable stage, then concealed they would be, while the lost creature deliberately sought to infect his wife, his children, his friends—whoever would not protest an idle touch of the hand. When the grayness touched the face and the backs of the hands, the creature became a feverish nightwanderer, subject to strange hallucinations and delusions and desires.

THE FOG began to part toward mid-morning as Paul drove deeper into the outskirts of Houston. The highway was becoming a commercial sub-center, lined with businesses and small shops. The sidewalks were showered with broken glass from windows kicked in by looters. Paul kept to the center of the deserted street, listening and watching cautiously for signs of life. The distant barking of a dog was the only sound in the once-growling metropolis. A flight of sparrows winged down the street, then darted in through a broken window to an inside nesting place.

He searched a small grocery store, looking for a snack, but the shelves were bare. The thoroughfare had served as a main avenue of escape, and the fugitives had looted it thoroughly to obtain provisions. He turned onto a side-street, then after several blocks turned again to parallel the highway, moving through an old residential section. Many houses had been left open, but few had been looted. He entered one old frame mansion and found a can of tomatoes in the kitchen. He opened it and sipped the tender delicacy from the container, while curiosity sent him prowling through the rooms.

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He wandered up the first flight of stairs, then halted with one foot on the landing. A body lay sprawled across the second flight—the body of a young man, dead quite a while. A well-rusted pistol had fallen from his hand. Paul dropped the tomatoes and bolted for the street. Suicide was a common recourse, when a man learned that he had been touched.

After two blocks, Paul stopped running. He sat panting on a fire hydrant and chided himself for being overly cautious. The man had been dead for *months*; and *infection* was achieved only through contact. Nevertheless, his scalp was still tingling. When he had rested briefly, he continued his plodding course toward the heart of the city. Toward noon, he saw another human being.

The man was standing on the loading dock of a warehouse, apparently enjoying the sunlight that came with the dissolving of the fog. He was slowly and solemnly spooning the contents of a can into a red-lipped mouth while his beard bobbled with appreciative chewing. Suddenly he saw Paul who had stopped in the center of the street with his hand on the butt of his pistol. The man backed away, tossed the can aside, and sprinted the length of the platform. He bounded off the end, snatched a bicycle away from the wall, and pedalled quickly out of sight while he bleated shrill blasts on a police whistle clenched between his teeth.

Paul trotted to the corner, but the man had made another turn. His whistle continued bleating. A signal? A dermie summons to a touching orgy? Paul stood still while he tried to overcome an urge to break into panicked flight. Other whistles were answering the first. After a minute, the clamor ceased; but silence was ominous.

IF A PARTY of cyclists moved in, he could not escape on foot. He darted toward the nearest warehouse, seeking a place to hide. Inside, he climbed a stack of boxes to a horizontal girder, kicked the stack to topple it, and stretched out belly-down on the steel eye-beam to command a clear shot at the entrances. He lay for an hour, waiting quietly for searchers. None came. At last he slid down a vertical support and returned to the loading platform. The street was empty and silent. With weapon ready, he continued his journey. He passed the next intersection without mishap.

Halfway up the block, a calm voice drawled a command from behind him: "Drop the gun, dermie. Get your hands behind your head."

He halted, motionless. No plague victim would hurl the dermie-charge at another. He dropped the pistol and turned slowly. Three men with drawn revolvers were clambering from the back of a stalled truck. They were all bearded, wore blue jeans, blue neckerchiefs, and green woolen shirts. He suddenly recalled that the man on the loading platform had been similarly dressed. A uniform?

"Turn around again!" barked the speaker.

Paul turned, realizing that the men were probably some sort of self-appointed quarantine patrol. Two ropes suddenly skidded out from behind and came to a stop near his feet on the pavement—a pair of lariat loops.

"One foot in each loop, dermie!" the speaker snapped.

When Paul obeyed, the ropes were jerked taut about his ankles, and two of the men trotted out to the sides, stood thirty feet apart, and pulled his legs out into a wide straddle. He quickly saw that any movement would cost him his balance.

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"Strip to the skin."

"I'm no dermie," Paul protested as he unbuttoned his shirt.

"We'll see for ourselves, joe," grunted the leader as he moved around to the front. "Get the top off first. If your chest's okay, we'll let your feet go."

When Paul had undressed, the leader walked around him slowly, making him spread his fingers and display the soles of his feet. He stood shivering and angry in the chilly winter air while the men satisfied themselves that he wore no gray patches of neuroderm.

"You're all right, I guess," the speaker admitted; then as Paul stooped to recover his clothing, the man growled, "Not those! Jim, get him a probie outfit."

PAUL CAUGHT a bundle of clean clothing, tossed to him from the back of the truck. There were jeans, a woolen shirt, and a kerchief, but the shirt and kerchief were red. He shot an inquiring glance at the leader, while he climbed into the welcome change.

"All newcomers are on two weeks probation," the man explained. "If you decide to stay in Houston, you'll get another exam next time the uniform code changes. Then you can join our outfit, if you don't show up with the plague. In fact, you'll have to join if you stay."

"What is the outfit?" Paul asked suspiciously.

"It just started. School teacher name of Georgelle organized it. We aim to keep dermies out. There's about six hundred of us now. We guard the downtown area, but soon as there's enough of us, we'll move out to take in more territory. Set up road blocks and all that. You're welcome, soon as we're sure you're clean. . .and can take orders."

"Whose orders?"

"Georgelle's. We got no room for goof-offs, and no time for argument. Anybody don't like the setup, he's welcome to get out. Jim here'll give you a leaflet on the rules. Better read it before you go anywhere. If you don't, you might make a wrong move. Make a wrong move, and you catch a bullet."

The man called Jim interrupted: "Reckon you better call off the other patrols, Digger?" he said respectfully to the leader.

Digger nodded curtly and turned to blow three short blasts and a long with his whistle. An answering short-long-short came from several blocks away. Other posts followed suit. Paul realized that he had been surrounded by a ring of similar ambushes.

"Jim, take him to the nearest water barrel, and see that he shaves," Digger ordered, then: "What's your name, probie? Also your job, if you had one."

"Paul Harris Oberlin. I was a mechanical engineering student when the plague struck. Part-time garage mechanic while I was in school."

Digger nodded and jotted down the information on a scratch-pad. "Good, I'll turn your name in to the registrar. Georgelle says to watch for college men. You might get a good assignment, later. Report to the Esperson Building on the seventeenth. That's inspection day. If you don't show up, we'll come looking for you. All loose probies'll get shot. Now Jim here's gonna see to it that you shave. Don't shave again until your two-weeker. That way, we can estimate how long you been in town—by looking at your beard. We got other ways that you don't need to know about. Georgelle's got a system worked out for everything, so don't try any tricks."

"Tell me, what do you do with dermies?"

Digger grinned at his men. "You'll find out, probie."

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PAUL WAS led to a rain barrel, given a basin, razor, and soap. He scraped his face clean while Jim sat at a safe distance, munching a quid of tobacco and watching the operation with tired boredom. The other men had gone.

"May I have my pistol back?"

"Uh-uh! Read the rules. No weapons for probies."

"Suppose I bump into a dermie?"

"Find yourself a whistle and toot a bunch of short blasts. Then run like hell. We'll take care of the dermies. Read the rules."

"Can I scrounge wherever I want to?"

"Probies have their own assigned areas. There's a map in the rules."

"Who wrote the rules, anyhow?"

"Jeezis!" the guard grunted disgustedly. "Read 'em and find out."

When Paul finished shaving, Jim stood up, stretched, then bounded off the platform and picked up his bicycle.

"Where do I go from here?" Paul called.

The man gave him a contemptuous snort, mounted the bike, and pedalled leisurely away. Paul gathered that he was to read the rules. He sat down beside the rain barrel and began studying the mimeographed leaflet.

Everything was cut and dried. As a probie, he was confined to an area six blocks square near the heart of the city. Once he entered it, a blue mark would be stamped on his forehead. At the two-week inspection, the indelible brand would be removed with a special solution. If a branded probie were caught outside his area, he would be forcibly escorted from the city. He was warned against attempting to impersonate permanent personnel, because a system of codes and passwords would ensnare him. One full page of the leaflet was devoted to propaganda. Houston was to become "a bulwark of health in a stricken world, and the leader of a glorious recovery." The paper was signed by Dr. Georgelle, who had given himself the title of Director.

The pamphlet left Paul with a vague uneasiness. The uniforms—they reminded him of neighborhood boys' gangs in the slums, wearing special sweaters and uttering secret passwords, whipping intruders and amputating the tails of stray cats in darkened garages. And, in another way, it made him think of frustrated little people, gathering at night in brown shirts around a bonfire to sing the *Horst Wessel Leid* and listen to grandiose oratory about glorious destinies. *Their* stray cats had been an unfavored race.

Of course, the dermies were not merely harmless alley prowlers. They were a real menace. And maybe Georgelle's methods were the only ones effective.

WHILE PAUL sat with the pamphlet on the platform, he had been gazing absently at the stalled truck from which the men had emerged. Suddenly it broke upon his consciousness that it was a diesel. He bounded off the platform, and went to check its fuel tank, which had been left uncapped.

He knew that it was useless to search for gasoline, but diesel fuel was another matter. The exodus had drained all existing supplies of high octane fuel for the escaping motorcade, but the evacuation had been too hasty and too fear-crazed to worry with out-of-the-ordinary methods. He sniffed the tank. It smelled faintly of gasoline. Some unknowing fugitive had evidently filled it with ordinary fuel, which had later evaporated. But if the cylinders had not been damaged by the trial, the truck might be useful. He checked the engine briefly, and

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decided that it had not been tried at all. The starting battery had been removed.

He walked across the street and looked back at the warehouse. It bore the sign of a trucking firm. He walked around the block, eyeing the streets cautiously for other patrolmen. There was a fueling platform on the opposite side of the block. A fresh splash of oil on the concrete told him that Georgelle's crew was using the fuel for some purpose—possibly for heating or cooking. He entered the building and found a repair shop, with several dismantled engines lying about. There was a rack of batteries in the corner, but a screwdriver placed across the terminals brought only a weak spark.

The chargers, of course, drew power from the city's electric service, which was dead. After giving the problem some thought, Paul connected five of the batteries in series, then placed a sixth across the total voltage, so that it would collect the charge that the others lost. Then he went to carry buckets of fuel from the pumps to the truck. When the tank was filled, he hoisted each end of the truck with a roll-under jack and inflated the tires with a hand-pump. It was a long and laborious job.

Twilight was gathering by the time he was ready to try it. Several times during the afternoon, he had been forced to hide from cyclists who wandered past, lest they send him on to the probie area and use the truck for their own purposes. Evidently they had long since decided that automotive transportation was a thing of the past.

A SERIES of short whistle-blasts came to his ears just as he was climbing into the cab. The signals were several blocks away, but some of the answering bleats were closer. Evidently another newcomer, he thought. Most new arrivals from the north would pass through the same area on their way downtown. He entered the cab, closed the door softly, and ducked low behind the dashboard as three cyclists raced across the intersection just ahead.

Paul settled down to wait for the all-clear. It came after about ten minutes. Apparently the newcomer had tried to run instead of hiding. When the cyclists returned, they were moving leisurely, and laughing among themselves. After they had passed the intersection, Paul stole quietly out of the cab and moved along the wall to the corner, to assure himself that all the patrolmen had gone. But the sound of shrill pleading came to his ears.

At the end of the building, he clung close to the wall and risked a glance around the corner. A block away, the nude figure of a girl was struggling between taut ropes held by green-shirted guards. She was a pretty girl, with a tousled mop of chestnut hair and clean white limbs—clean except for her forearms, which appeared dipped in dark stain. Then he saw the dark irregular splotch across her flank, like a splash of ink not quite washed clean. She was a dermie.

Paul ducked close to the ground so that his face was hidden by a clump of grass at the corner. A man—the leader of the group—had left the girl, and was advancing up the street toward Paul, who prepared to roll under the building out of sight. But in the middle of the block, the man stopped. He lifted a manhole cover in the pavement, then went back for the girl's clothing, which he dragged at the end of a fishing-pole with a wire hook at its tip. He dropped the clothing, one piece at a

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time, into the man-hole. A cloud of white dust arose from it, and the man stepped back to avoid the dust. Quicklime, Rolf guessed.

Then the leader cupped his hands to his mouth and called back to the others. "Okay, drag her on up here!" He drew his revolver and waited while they tugged the struggling girl toward the manhole.

PAUL FELT suddenly ill. He had seen dermies shot in self-defense by fugitives from their deathly gray hands, but here was cold and efficient elimination. Here was Dachau and Buchenwald and the nameless camps of Siberia. He turned and bolted for the truck.

The sound of its engine starting brought a halt to the disposal of the pest-girl. The leader appeared at the intersection and stared uncertainly at the truck, as Rolf nosed it away from the building. He fidgeted with his revolver doubtfully, and called something over his shoulder to the others. Then he began walking out into the street and signalling for the truck to stop. Paul let it crawl slowly ahead, and leaned out the window to eye the man questioningly.

"How the hell you get that started?" the leader called excitedly. He was still holding the pistol, but it dangled almost unnoticed in his hand. Paul suddenly fed fuel to the diesel and swerved sharply toward the surprised guardsman.

The leader yelped and dived for safety, but the fender caught his hips, spun him off balance, and smashed him down against the pavement. As the truck thundered around the corner toward the girl and her captors, he glanced in the mirror to see the hurt man weakly trying to crawl out of the street. Paul was certain that he was not mortally wounded.

As the truck lumbered on, the girl threw herself prone before it, since the ropes prevented any escape. Paul swerved erratically, sending the girl's captors scurrying for the alley. Then he aimed the wheels to straddle her body. She glanced up, screamed, then hugged the pavement as the behemouth thundered overhead. A bullet ploughed a furrow across the hood. Paul ducked low in the seat and jammed the brake pedal down, as soon as he thought she was clear.

There were several shots, but apparently they were shooting at the girl. Paul counted three seconds, then gunned the engine again. If she hadn't climbed aboard, it was just tough luck, he thought grimly. He shouldn't have tried to save her anyway. But continued shooting told him that she had managed to get inside. The trailer was heaped with clothing, and he trusted the mound of material to halt the barrage of bullets. He heard the explosion of a blowout as he swung around the next corner, and the trailer lurched dangerously. It swayed from side to side as he gathered speed down the wide and trafficless avenue. But the truck had double wheels, and soon the dangerous lurching ceased.

He roared on through the metropolitan area, staying on the same street and gathering speed. An occasional scrounger or cyclist stopped to stare, but they seemed too surprised to act. And they could not have known what had transpired a few blocks away.

PAUL COULD not stop to see if he had a passenger, or if she was still alive. She was more dangerous than the gunmen. Any gratitude she might feel toward her rescuer would be quickly buried beneath her craving to spread the disease. He wished fervently that he had let the patrolmen kill her. Now he was faced with

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the problem of getting rid of her. He noticed, however, that mirrors were mounted on both sides of the cab. If he stopped the truck, and if she climbed out, he could see, and move away again before she had a chance to approach him. But he decided to wait until they were out of the city.

Soon he saw a highway marker, then a sign that said "Galveston—58 Miles". He bore ahead, thinking that perhaps the island-city would provide some good scrounging, without the regimentation of Doctor Georgelle's efficient system with its plans for "glorious recovery".

Twenty miles beyond the city limits, he stopped the truck, let the engine idle, and waited for his passenger to climb out. He watched the mirrors anxiously, wondering if he could get away in time if she came sprinting for the cab. He locked the doors and laid a jack-handle across the seat as an added precaution. Nothing happened. He rolled down the window and shouted toward the rear.

"All passengers off the bus! Last stop! Everybody out!"

Still the girl did not appear. Then he heard something—a light tap from the trailer, and a murmur—or a moan. She was there all right. He called again, but she made no response. It was nearly dark outside.

At last he seized the jack-handle, opened the door, and stepped out of the cab. Wary of a trick, he skirted wide around the trailer and approached it from the rear. One door was closed, while the other swung free. He stopped a few yards away and peered inside. At first he saw nothing.

"Get out, but keep away or I'll kill you."

Then he saw her move. She was sitting on the floor, leaning back against a heap of clothing, a dozen feet from the entrance. He stepped forward cautiously and flung open the other door. She turned her head to look at him peculiarly, but said nothing. He could see that she had donned some of the clothing, but one trouser-leg was rolled up, and she had tied a rag tightly about her ankle.

"Are you hurt?"

She nodded "Bullet . . ." She rolled her head dizzily and moaned.

PAUL WENT back to the cab to search for a first-aid kit. He found one, together with a flashlight and spare batteries in the glove compartment. He made certain that the cells were not corroded and that the light would burn feebly. Then he returned to the trailer, chiding himself for a prize fool. A sensible human would haul the dermie out at the end of a towing chain and leave her sitting by the side of the road.

"If you try to touch me, I'll brain you!" he warned, as he clambered into the cab.

She looked up again. "Would you feel . . . like enjoying anything . . . if you were bleeding like this?" she muttered weakly. The flashlight beam caught the glitter of pain in her eyes, and accentuated the pallor of her small face. She was a pretty girl—scarcely older than twenty—but Paul was in no mood to appreciate pretty women, especially dermies.

"So that's how you think of it, eh? Enjoying yourself!"

She said nothing. She dropped her forehead against her knee and rolled it slowly.

"Where are you hit? Just the foot?"

"Ankle . . ."

"All right, take the rag off. Let's see."

"The wound's in back."

"All right, lie down on your stomach, and keep your hands under your head."

She stretched out weakly, and he shone the light over her leg, to make

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certain its skin was clear of neuroderm. Then he looked at the ankle, and said nothing for a time. The bullet had missed the joint, but had neatly severed the Achilles-tendon just above the heel.

"You're a plucky kid," he grunted, wondering how she had endured the self-torture of getting the shoe off and clothing herself.

"It was cold back here—without clothes," she muttered.

Paul opened the first-aid packet and found an envelope of sulfa-powder. Without touching her, he emptied it into the wound, which was beginning to bleed again. There was nothing else he could do. The tendon had pulled apart and would require surgical stitching to bring it together until it could heal. Such attention was out of the question.

She broke the silence. "I:... I'm going to be crippled, aren't I?"

"Oh, not crippled," he heard himself telling her. "If we can get you to a doctor, anyway. Tendons can be sutured with wire. He'll probably put your foot in a cast, and you might get a stiff ankle from it."

She lay breathing quietly, denying his hopeful words by her silence.

"Here!" he said. "Here's a gauze pad and some tape. Can you manage it yourself."

SHE STARTED to sit up. He placed the first aid pack beside her, and backed to the door. She fumbled in the kit, and whimpered while she taped the pad in place.

"There's a tourniquet in there, too. Use it if the bleeding's worse."

She looked up to watch his silhouette against the darkening evening sky. "Thanks... thanks a lot, mister. I'm grateful. I promise not to touch you. Not if you don't want me to."

Shivering, he moved back to the cab. Why did they always get that insane idea that they were doing their victims a favor by giving them the neural plague? *Not if you don't want me to.* He shuddered as he drove away. She felt that way now, while the pain robbed her of the craving, but later—unless he got rid of her quickly—she would come to feel that she owed it to him—as a favor. The disease perpetuated itself by arousing such strange delusions in its wearer. The micro-organisms' methods of survival were indeed highly specialized. Paul felt certain that such animalicules had not evolved on Earth.

A light gleamed here and there along the Alvin-Galveston highway—oil lamps, shining from lonely cottages whose occupants had not felt the pressing urgency of the crowded city. But he had no doubt that to approach one of the farmhouses would bring a rifle bullet as a welcome. Where could he find help for the girl? No one would touch her but another dermie. Perhaps he could unhitch the trailer and leave her in downtown Galveston, with a sign hung on the back—"Wounded dermie inside." The plague-victims would care for their own—if they found her.

He chided himself again for worrying about her. Saving her life didn't make him responsible for her...did it? After all, if she lived, and the leg healed, she would only prowl in search of healthy victims again. She would never be rid of the disease, nor would she ever die of it—so far as anyone knew. The death rate was high among dermies, but the cause was usually a bullet.

Paul passed a fork in the highway and knew that the bridge was just ahead. Beyond the channel lay Galveston Island, once brightly lit and laughing in its role as sea-side resort—now immersed in darkness. The wind whipped at the truck from the southwest as the road led up onto

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the wide causeway. A faint glow in the east spoke of a moon about to rise. He saw the side structure of the draw-bridge just ahead.

SUDDENLY HE clutched at the wheel, smashed furiously down on the brake, and tugged the emergency back. The tires howled ahead on the smooth concrete, and the force threw him forward over the wheel. Dusty water swirled far below where the upward folding gates of the draw-bridge had once been. He skidded to a stop ten feet from the end. When he climbed out, the girl was calling weakly from the trailer, but he walked to the edge and looked over. Someone had done a job with dynamite.

Why, he wondered. To keep islanders on the island, or to keep mainlanders off? Had another Doctor Georgelle started his own small nation in Galveston? It seemed more likely that the lower island dwellers had done the demolition.

He looked back at the truck. An experienced truckster might be able to swing it around all right, but Paul was doubtful. Nevertheless, he climbed back in the cab and tried it. Half an hour later he was hopelessly jammed, with the trailer twisted aside and the cab wedged near the sheer drop to the water. He gave it up and went back to inspect his infected cargo.

She was asleep, but moaning faintly. He prodded her awake with the jack-handle. "Can you crawl, kid? If you can, come back to the door."

She nodded, and began dragging herself toward the flashlight. She clenched her lip between her teeth to keep from whimpering, but her breath came as a voiced murmur . . . *nnnng* . . . *nnnng* . . .

She sagged weakly when she reached the entrance, and for a moment he thought she had fainted. Then she looked up. "What next, skipper?" she panted.

"I . . . I don't know. Can you let yourself down to the pavement?"

She glanced over the edge and shook her head. "With a rope, maybe. There's one back there someplace. If you're scared of me, I'll try to crawl and get it."

"Hands to yourself?" he asked suspiciously; then he thanked the darkness for hiding the heat of shame that crawled to his face.

"I won't . . ."

He scrambled into the trailer quickly and brought back the rope. "I'll climb up on top and let it down in front of you. Grab hold and let yourself down.

A FEW minutes later she was sitting on the concrete causeway looking at the wrecked draw. "Oh!" she muttered as he scrambled down from atop the trailer. "I thought you just wanted to dump me here. We're stuck, huh?"

"Yeah! We might swim it, but doubt if you could make it."

"I'd try . . ." She paused, cocking her head slightly. "There's a boat moored under the bridge. Right over there."

"What makes you think so?"

"Water lapping against wood. Listen." Then she shook her head. "I forgot. You're not hyper."

"I'm not what?" Paul listened. The water sounds seemed homogeneous.

"Hyperacute. Sharp senses. You know, it's one of the symptoms."

He nodded, remembering vaguely that he'd heard something to that effect—but he'd chalked it up as a hallucinatory phenomenon. He walked to the rail and shone his light toward the water. The boat was there—tugging its rope taut from the mooring as the tide swirled about it. The bottom was still fairly dry, indicating

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that a recent rower had crossed from the island to the mainland.

"Think you can hold onto the rope if I let you down?" he called.

She gave him a quick glance, then picked up the end she had previously touched and tied a loop about her waist. She began crawling toward the rail. Paul fought down a crazy urge to pick her up and carry her; plague be damned. But he had already left himself dangerously open to contagion. Still, he felt the drumming charges of conscience...depart from me, ye accursed, for I was sick and you visited me not...

He turned quickly away, and began knotting the end of the rope about the rail. He reminded himself that any sane person would desert her at once, and swim on to safety. Yet, he could not. In the oversized clothing she looked like a child, hurt and helpless. Paul knew the demanding arrogance that could possess the wounded—*help me, you've got to help me, you damn merciless bastard!.. no, don't touch me there, damn you!* Too many times, he had heard the sick curse the physician, and the injured curse the rescuer. Blind aggression, trying to strike back at pain.

But the girl made no complaint except for the involuntary hurt-sounds. She asked nothing, and accepted his aid with a wide-eyed gratitude that left him weak. He thought that it would be easier to leave her if she would only beg, or plead, or demand.

"Can you start me swinging a little?" she called as he lowered her toward the water.

PAUL'S EYES probed the darkness below, trying to sort the shadows, to make certain which was the boat. He used both hands to feed out the rope, and the light laid on the rail only seemed to blind him. She began swinging herself pendulum-wise somewhere beneath him.

"When I say 'ready', let me go!" she shrilled.

"You're not going to drop!"

"Have to! Boat's out further. Got to swing for it. I can't swim, really."

"But you'll hurt your—"

"Ready!"

Paul still clung to the rope. "I'll let you down into the water and you can hang onto the rope. I'll dive, and then pull you into the boat."

"Uh-uh! You'd have to touch me. You don't want that, do you? Just a second now...one more swing... ready!"

He let the rope go. With a clatter and a thud, she hit the boat. Three sharp cries of pain clawed at him. Then—muffled sobbing.

"Are you all right?"

Sobs. She seemed not to hear him.

"Jeezis!" He sprinted for the brink of the draw-bridge and dived out over the deep channel. How far...down ...down... Icy water stung his body with sharp whips, then opened to embrace him. He fought to the surface and swam toward the dark shadow of the boat. The sobbing had subsided. He grasped the prow and hauled himself dripping from the channel. She was lying curled in the bottom of the boat.

"Kid...you all right, kid?"

"Sorry...I'm such a baby," she gasped, and dragged herself back to the stern.

Paul found a paddle, but no oars. He cast off and began digging water toward the other side, but the tide tugged them relentlessly away from the bridge. He gave it up and paddled toward the distant shore. "You know anything about Galveston?" he called—mostly to reassure himself that she was not approaching him in the darkness with the death-gray hands.

"I used to come here for the sum-

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mer. I know a little about it."

PAUL URGED her to talk while he plowed toward the island. Her name was Willie, and she insisted that it was for Willow, not for Wilhelmina. She came from Dallas, and claimed she was a salesman's daughter who was done in by a travelling farmer. The farmer, she explained, was just a wandering dermie who had caught her napping by the roadside. He had stroked her arms until she awoke, then had run away, howling with glee.

"That was three weeks ago," she said. "If I'd had a gun, I'd have dropped him. Of course, I know better now."

Paul shuddered and paddled on. "Why did you head south?"

"I was coming here."

"Here? To Galveston?"

"Uh-huh. I heard someone say that a lot of nuns were coming to the island. I thought maybe they'd take me in."

The moon was high over the lightless city, and the tide had swept the small boat far east from the bridge by the time Paul's paddle dug into mud beneath the shallow water. He bounded out and dragged the boat through thin marsh grass onto the shore. Fifty yards away, a ramshackle fishing cottage lay sleeping in moonlight.

"Stay here, Willie," he grunted. "I'll find a couple of boards or something for crutches."

He rummaged about through a shed behind the cottage and brought back a wheel-barrow. Moaning and laughing at once, she struggled into it, and he wheeled her to the house, humming a verse of *Rickshaw Boy*.

"You're a funny guy, Paul. I'm sorry. . . ." She jiggled her tousled head in the moonglint, as if she disapproved of her own words.

Paul tried the cottage door, kicked it open, then walked the wheelbarrow up three steps and into a musty room. He struck a match, found an oil lamp with a little kerosene, and lit it. Willie caught her breath.

He looked around. "Company," he grunted.

The company sat in a fragile rocker with a shawl about her shoulders and a shotgun between her knees. She had been dead at least a month. The charge of buckshot had sieved the ceiling and spattered it with bits of gray hair and brown blood.

"Stay here," he told the girl tonelessly. "I'll try to get a dermie somewhere—one who knows how to sew a tendon. Got any ideas?"

She was staring with a sick face at the old woman. "Here? With—"

"She won't bother you," he said as he gently disentangled the gun from the corpse. He moved to a cupboard and found a box of shells behind an ornate teapot. "I may not be back, but I'll send somebody."

She buried her face in her plague-stained hands, and he stood for a moment watching her shoulders shiver. "Don't worry . . . I will send somebody." He stepped to the porcelain sink and pocketed a wafer-thin sliver of dry soap.

"What's that for?" she muttered, looking up again.

HE THOUGHT of a lie, then checked it. "To wash you off of me," he said truthfully. "I might have got too close. Soap won't do much good, but I'll feel better." He looked at the corpse coolly. "Didn't do her much good. Buckshot's the best antiseptic all right."

Willie moaned as he went out the door. He heard her crying as he walked down to the waterfront. She was still crying when he waded back to shore, after a thorough scrubbing.

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He was sorry he'd spoken cruelly, but it was such a damned relief to get rid of her...

With the shotgun cradled on his arm, he began putting distance between himself and the sobbing. But the sound worried his ears, even after he realized that he was no longer hearing her.

He strode a short distance inland past scattered fishing shanties, then took the highway toward the city whose outskirts he was entering. It would be at least an hour's trek to the end of the island where he would be most likely to encounter someone with medical training. The hospitals were down there, the medical school, and the most likely place for any charitable nuns—if Willie's rumor were true. Paul meant to capture a dermie doctor or nurse and force the amorous-handed maniac at gun-point to go to Willie's aid. Then he would be done with her. When she stopped hurting, she would start craving—and he had no doubt that he would be the object of her manual affections.

The bay was wind-chopped in the moonglow, no longer glittering from the lights along 61st Street. The oleanders along Broadway were choked up with weeds. Cats or rabbits rustled in the tousled growth that had been a carefully tended parkway.

Paul wondered why the plague had chosen Man, and not the lower animals. It was true that an occasional dog or cow was seen with the plague, but the focus was upon humanity. And the craving to spread the disease was Man-directed, even in animals. It was as if the neural entity deliberately sought out the species with the most complex nervous system. Was its onslaught really connected with the meteorite swarm? Paul believed that it was.

In the first place, the meteorites had not been predicted. They were not a part of the regular cosmic bombardment. And then there was the strange report that they were *manufactured* projectiles, teeming with frozen microorganisms which came alive upon thawing. In these days of tumult and confusion, however, it was hard. Nevertheless Paul believed it. Neuroderm had no first cousins among Earth-diseases.

WHAT MANNER of beings, then, had sent such a curse? Potential invaders? If so, they were slow in coming. One thing was generally agreed upon by the scientists: the missiles had not been "sent" from another solar planet. Their direction upon entering the atmosphere was wrong. They could conceivably have been fired from an interplanetary launching ship, but their velocity was about equal to the theoretical velocity which a body would obtain in falling sunward from a near-infinite distance. This seemed to hint the projectiles had come from another star.

Paul was startled suddenly by the flare of a match from the shadow of a building. He stopped dead-still in the street. A man was leaning against the wall to light a cigarette. He flicked the match out, and Paul watched the cigarette-glow make an arc as the man waved at him.

"Nice night, isn't it?" said the voice from the darkness.

Paul stood exposed in the moonlight, carrying the shotgun at the ready. The voice sounded like that of an adolescent, not fully changed to its adult timbre. If the youth wasn't a dermie, why wasn't he afraid that Paul might be one? And if he was a dermie, why wasn't he advancing in the hope that Paul might be as yet untouched?

"I said, 'Nice night, isn't it?' Whatcha carrying the gun for? Been shooting rabbits?"

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Paul moved a little closer and fumbled for his flashlight. Then he threw its beam on the slouching figure in the shadows. He saw a young man, perhaps sixteen, reclining against the wall. He saw the pearl-gray face that characterized the final and permanent stage of neuroderm! He stood frozen to the spot a dozen feet away from the youth, who blinked perplexedly into the light. The kid was assuming automatically that he was another dermie! Paul tried to keep him blinded while he played along with the fallacy.

"Yeah, it's a nice night. You got any idea where I can find a doctor?"

The boy frowned. "Doctor? You mean you don't know?"

"Know what? I'm new here."

"New? Oh..." the boy's nostrils began twitching slightly, as if he were sniffing at the night air. "Well, most of the priests down at Saint Mary's were missionaries. They're all doctors. Why? You sick?"

"No, there's a girl... But never mind. How do I get there? And are any of them dermies?"

The boys eyes wandered peculiarly, and his mouth fell open, as if he had been asked why a circle wasn't square. "You are new, aren't you? They're all dermies, if you want to call them that. Wh—" Again the nostrils were flaring. He flicked the cigarette away suddenly and inhaled a slow draught of the breeze. "I...I smell a non-hyper," he muttered.

PAUL STARTED to back away. His scalp bristled a warning. The boy advanced a step toward him. A slow beam of anticipation began to glow in his face. He bared his teeth in a wide grin of pleasure.

"You're not a hyper yet," he hissed moving forward. "I've never had a chance to touch a non-hyper..."

"Stay back, or I'll kill you!"

The lad giggled and came on, talking to himself. "The padre says it's wrong, but...you smell so...so... ugh..." He flung himself forward with a low throaty cry.

Paul sidestepped the charge and brought the gun-barrel down across the boy's head. The dermie sprawled howling in the street. Paul pushed the gun close to his face, but the youth started up again. Paul jabbed viciously with the barrel, and felt it strike and tear. "I don't want to have to blow your head off—"

The boy howled and fell back. He crouched panting on his hands and knees, head hung low, watching a dark puddle of blood gather on the pavement from a deep gash across his cheek. "Whatcha wanta do that for?" he whimpered. "I wasn't gonna hurt you." His tone was that of a wronged and rejected suitor.

"Now, where's St. Mary's? Is that one of the hospitals? How do I get there?" Paul had backed to a safe distance and was covering the youth with the gun.

"Straight down Broadway...to the Boulevard...you'll see it down that neighborhood. About fourth street, I think." The boy looked up, and Paul saw the extent of the gash. It was deep and ragged, and the kid was crying.

"Get up! You're going to lead me there."

Pain had blanketed the call of the craving. The boy struggled to his feet, pressed a handkerchief against the wound, and with an angry glance at Paul, he set out down the road. Paul followed ten yards behind.

"If you take me through any dermie traps, I'll kill you."

"There aren't any traps," the youth mumbled.

Paul snorted unbelief, but did not repeat the warning. "What made you

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think I was another dermie?" he snapped.

"Because there's no non-hypers in Galveston. This is a hyper colony. A non-hyper used to drift in occasionally, but the priests had the bridge dynamited. The non-hypers upset the colony. As long as there aren't any around to smell, nobody causes any trouble. During the day, there's a guard out on the causeway, and if any hypers come looking for a place to stay, the guard ferries them across. If non-hypers come, he tells them about the colony, and they go away."

PAUL GROANED. He had stumbled into a rat's nest. Was there no refuge from the gray curse? Now he would have to move on. It seemed a hopeless quest. Maybe the old man he met on his way to Houston had arrived at the only possible hope for peace: submission to the plague. But the thought sickened him somehow. He would have to find some barren island, find a healthy mate, and go to live a savage existence apart from all traces of civilization.

"Didn't the guard stop you at the bridge?" the boy asked. "He never came back today. He must be still out there."

Paul grunted "no" in a tone that warned against idle conversation. He guessed what had happened. The dermie guard had probably spotted some healthy wanderers; and instead of warning them away, he rowed across the draw-bridge and set out to chase them. His body probably lay along the highway somewhere, if the hypothetical wanderers were armed.

When they reached 23rd Street, a few blocks from the heart of the city, Paul hissed at the boy to stop. He heard someone laugh. Footsteps were wandering along the sidewalk, overhung by trees. He whispered to the boy to take refuge behind a hedge. They crouched in the shadows several yards apart while the voices drew nearer.

"Brother James has a nice tenor," someone said softly. "But he sings his Latin with a western drawl. It sounds . . . well . . . peculiar, to say the least. Brother John is a stickler for pronunciation. He won't let Fra James solo. Says it gives a burlesque effect to the choir. Says it makes the sisters giggle."

The other man chuckled quietly and started to reply. But his voice broke off suddenly. The footsteps stopped a dozen feet from Paul's hiding place. Paul, peering through the hedge, saw a pair of brown-robed monks standing on the sidewalk. They were looking around suspiciously.

"Brother Thomas, do you smell—"

"Aye, I smell it."

Paul changed his position slightly, so as to keep the gun pointed toward the pair of plague-stricken monastics. They stood in embarrassed silence, peering into the darkness, and shuffling their feet uneasily. One of them suddenly pinched his nose between thumb and forefinger. His companion followed suit.

"Blessed be God," quavered one.

"Blessed be His Holy Name," answered the other.

"Blessed be Jesus Chirst, true God and true Man."

"Blessed be . . ."

GATHERING THEIR robes high about their shins, the two monks turned and scurried away, muttering the Litany of the Divine Praises as they went. Paul stood up and stared after them in amazement. The sight of dermies running from a potential victim was almost beyond belief. He questioned his young guide. Still holding the handkerchief against his bleeding face, the boy hung his head.

"Bishop made a ruling against

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touching non-hypers" he explained miserably. "Says it's a sin, unless the non-hyper submits of his own free will. Says even then it's wrong, except in the ordinary ways that people come in contact with each other. Calls it fleshly desire, and all that."

"Then why did you try to do it?"

"I ain't so religious."

"Well, sonny, you better get religious until we come to the hospital. Now, let's go."

They marched on down Broadway encountering no other pedestrians. Twenty minutes later, they were standing in the shadows before a hulking brick building, some of whose windows were yellow with lamplight. Moonlight bathed the statue of a woman standing on a ledge over the entrance, indicating to Paul that this was the hospital.

"All right, boy. You go in and send out a dermie doctor. Tell him somebody wants to see him, but if you say I'm not a dermie, I'll come in and kill you. Now move. And don't come back. Stay to get your face fixed."

The youth stumbled toward the entrance. Paul sat in the shadow of a tree, where he could see twenty yards in all directions and guard himself against approach. Soon a black-clad priest came out of the emergency entrance, stopped on the sidewalk, and glanced around.

"Over here!" Paul hissed from across the street.

The priest advanced uncertainly. In the center of the road he stopped again, and held his nose. "Y-you're a non-hyper," he said, almost accusingly.

"That's right, and I've got a gun, so don't try anything."

"What's wrong? Are you sick? The lad said—"

"There's a dermie girl down the island. She's been shot. Tendon behind her heel is cut clean through. You're going to help her."

"Of course, but..." The priest paused. "You? A non-hyper? Helping a so-called dermie?" His voice went high with amazement.

"So I'm a sucker!" Paul barked. "Now get what you need, and come on."

"The Lord bless you," the priest mumbled in embarrassment as he hurried away.

"Don't sic any of your maniacs on me!" Paul called after him. "I'm armed."

"I'll have to bring a surgeon," the cleric said over his shoulder.

FIVE MINUTES later, Paul heard the muffled grunt of a starter. Then an engine coughed to life. Startled, he scurried away from the tree and sought safety in a clump of shrubs. An ambulance backed out of the driveway and into the street. It parked at the curb by the tree, engine running. A pallid face glanced out curiously toward the shadows. "Where are you?" it called, but it was not the priest's voice.

Paul stood up and advanced a few steps.

"We'll have to wait on Father Mendelhaus," the driver called. "He'll be a few minutes."

"You a dermie?"

"Of course. But don't worry. I've plugged my nose and I'm wearing rubber gloves. I can't smell you. The sight of a non-hyper arouses some craving, of course. But it can be overcome with a little will-power. I won't infect you, although I don't understand why you non-hypers fight so hard. You're bound to catch it sooner or later. And the world can't get back to normal until everybody has it."

Paul avoided the startling thought. "You the surgeon?"

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"Uh, yes. Father Williamson's the name. I'm not really a specialist, but I did some surgery in Korea. How's the girl's condition? Suffering shock?"

"I wouldn't know."

They fell silent until Father Mendelhaus returned. He came across the street carrying a bag in one hand and a brown bottle in the other. He held the bottle by the neck with a pair of tongs, and Paul could see the exterior of the bottle steaming slightly as the priest passed through the ambulance's headlights. He placed the flask on the curb without touching it, then spoke to the man in the shadows.

"Would you step behind the hedge and disrobe, young man? Then rub yourself thoroughly with this oil."

"I doubt it," Paul snapped. "What is it?"

"Don't worry, it's been in the sterilizer. That's what took me so long. It may be a little hot for you, however. It's only an antiseptic and deodorant. It'll kill your odor, and it'll also give you some protection against picking up stray micro-organisms."

After a few moments of anxious hesitation, Paul decided to trust the priest. He carried the hot flask into the brush, undressed, and bathed himself with the warm aromatic oil. Then he slipped back into his clothes and reapproached the ambulance.

"Ride in back," Mendelhaus told him. "And you won't be infected. No one's been in there for several weeks, and as you probably know, the micro-organisms die after a few hours exposure. They have to be transmitted from skin to skin, or else an object has to be rehandled very soon after a hyper has touched it."

PAUL WARILY climbed inside. Mendelhaus opened a slide and spoke through it from the front seat. "You'll have to show us the way."

"Straight out Broadway. Say, where did you get the gasoline for this wagon."

The priest paused. "That has been something of a secret. Oh well...I'll tell you. There's a tanker out in the harbor. The people left town too quickly to think of it. Automobiles are scarcer than fuel in Galveston. Up north, you find them stalled everywhere. But since Galveston didn't have any through-traffic, there were no cars running out of gas. The ones we have are the ones that were left in the repair-shop. Something wrong with them. And we don't have any mechanics to fix them."

Paul neglected to mention that he was qualified for the job. The priest might get ideas. He fell into gloomy silence as the ambulance turned onto Broadway and headed down-island. He watched the back of the priests' heads, silhouetted against the headlighted pavement. They seemed not at all concerned about their disease. Mendelhaus was a slender man, with a blond crew-cut and rather bushy eyebrows. He had a thin, aristocratic face—now plague-gray—but j o v i a l enough. It might be the face of an ascetic, but for the quick blue eyes that seemed full of lively interest rather than inward-turning mysticism. Williamson on the other hand was a rather plain man, with a stolid tweedy look, despite his black cassock.

"What do you think of our plan here?" asked Father Mendelhaus.

"What plan?" Paul grunted.

"Oh, didn't the boy tell you? We're trying to make the island a refuge for hypers who are willing to sublimate their craving and turn their attentions toward reconstruction. We're also trying to make an objective study of this neural condition. We have some good scientific minds, too—Doctor Relmone of Fordham, Father Seyes of

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Notre Dame, two biologists from Boston College..."

"Dermies trying to cure the plague?" Paul gasped.

Mendelhaus laughed merrily. "I didn't say cure it, son. I said 'study it.'"

"Why?"

"To learn how to live with it, of course. It's been pointed out by our philosophers that things become evil only through human misuse. Morphine, for instance, is a product of the Creator; it is therefore good when properly used for relief of pain. When mistreated by an addict, it becomes a monster. We bear this in mind as we study neuroderm."

Paul snorted contemptuously. "Leprosy is evil, I suppose, because Man mistreated bacteria?"

The priest laughed again. "You've got me there. I'm no philosopher. But you can't compare neuroderm with leprosy."

Paul shuddered. "The hell I can't! It's worse."

"Ah? Suppose you tell me what makes it worse? List the symptoms for me."

PAUL HESITATED, listing them mentally. They were: discoloration of the skin, low fever, hallucinations, and the insane craving to infect others. They seemed bad enough, so he listed them orally. "Of course, people don't die of it," he added. "But which is worse, insanity or death?"

The priest turned to smile back at him through the port-hole. "Would you call me insane? It's true that victims have frequently lost their minds. But that's not a direct result of neuroderm. Tell me, how would you feel if everyone screamed and ran when they saw you coming, or hunted you down like a criminal? How long would your sanity last?"

Paul said nothing. Perhaps the anathema was a contributing factor...

"Unless you were of very sound mind to begin with, you probably couldn't endure it."

"But the craving...and the hallucinations..."

"True," murmured the priest thoughtfully. "The hallucinations. Tell me something else, if all the world was blind save one man, wouldn't the world be inclined to call that man's sight a hallucination? And the man with eyes might even come to agree with the world."

Again Paul was silent. There was no arguing with Mendelhaus, who probably suffered the strange delusions and thought them real.

"And the craving," the priest went on. "It's true that the craving can be a rather unpleasant symptom. It's the condition's way of perpetuating itself. Although we're not certain how it works, it seems able to stimulate erotic sensations in the hands. By some process in the brain, perhaps. We do know the micro-organisms get to the brain, but we're not yet sure what they do there."

"What facts have you discovered?" Paul asked cautiously.

Mendelhaus grinned at him. "Tut! I'm not going to tell you, because I don't want to be called a 'crazy dermie'. You wouldn't believe me, you see."

Paul glanced outside and saw that they were approaching the vicinity of the fishing cottage. He pointed out the lamplit window to the driver, and the ambulance turned onto a side-road. Soon they were parked behind the shanty. The priests scrambled out and carried the stretcher toward the light, while Paul skulked to a safer distance and sat down in the grass to watch. When Willie was safe in the vehicle, he meant to walk back to the bridge,

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swim across the gap, and return to the mainland.

Soon Mendelhaus came out and walked toward him with a solemn stride, although Paul was sitting quietly in deepest shadow—invisible, he had thought. He arose quickly as the priest approached. Anxiety tightened his throat. "Is she...is Willie..."

"She's irrational," Mendelhaus murmured sadly. "Almost...less than sane. Some of it may be due to high fever, but..."

"Yes?"

"She tried to kill herself. With a knife. Said something about buckshot being the best way, or something..."

"Jeezis! Jeezis!" Paul sank weakly in the grass and covered his face with his hands.

"Blessed be His Holy Name," murmured the priest by way of turning the oath aside. "She didn't hurt herself badly, though. Wrist's cut a little. She was too weak to do a real job of it. Father Will's giving her a hypo and a tetanus shot and some sulfa. We're out of penicillin."

He stopped speaking and watched Paul's wretchedness for a moment. "You love the girl, don't you?"

Paul stiffened. "Are you crazy? Love a little tramp dermie? Jeezis..."

"Blessed be—"

"Listen! Will she be all right? I'm getting out of here!" He climbed unsteadily to his feet.

"I don't know, son. Infection's the real threat, and shock. If we'd got to her sooner, she'd have been safer. And if she was in the ultimate stage of neuroderm, it would help."

"Why?"

"OH, VARIOUS reasons. You'll learn, someday. But listen, you look exhausted. Why don't you come back to the hospital with us? The third floor is entirely vacant. There's no danger of infection up there, and we keep a sterile room ready just in case we get a non-hyper case. You can lock the door inside, if you want to, but it wouldn't be necessary. Nuns are on the floor below. Our male staff lives in the basement. There aren't any laymen in the building. I'll guarantee that you won't be bothered."

"No, I've got to go," he growled, then softened his voice: "I appreciate it though, Father."

"Whatever you wish. I'm sorry, though. You might be able to provide yourself with some kind of transportation if you waited."

"Uh-uh! I don't mind telling you, your island makes me jumpy."

"Why?"

Paul glanced at the priest's gray hands. "Well...you still feel the craving, don't you?"

Mendelhaus touched his nose. "Cotton plugs, with a little camphor. I can't smell you." He hesitated. "No, I won't lie to you. The urge to touch is still there to some extent."

"And in a moment of weakness, somebody might—"

The priest straightened his shoulders. His eyes went chilly. "I have taken certain vows, young man. Sometimes when I see a beautiful woman, I feel desire. When I see a man eating a thick steak on a fastday, I feel envy and hunger. When I see a doctor earning large fees, I chafe under the vow of poverty. But by denying desire's demands, desire learns to make itself useful in other ways. Sublimation, some call it. A priest can use it and do more useful work thereby. I am a priest."

He nodded curtly, turned on his heel and strode away. Halfway to the cottage, he paused. "She's calling for someone named Paul. Know who it might be? Family perhaps?"

Paul stood speechless. The priest

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shrugged and continued toward the lighted doorway.

"Father, wait..."

"Yes?"

"I—I am a little tired. The room... I mean, will you show me where to get transportation tomorrow?"

"Certainly."

BEFORE MIDNIGHT, the party had returned to the hospital. Paul lay on a comfortable mattress for the first time in weeks, sleepless, and staring at the moonlight on the sill. Somewhere downstairs, Willie was lying unconscious in an operating room, while the surgeon tried to repair the torn tendon. Paul had ridden back with them in the ambulance, sitting a few feet from the stretcher, avoiding her sometimes wandering arms, and listening to her delirious moaning.

Now he felt his skin crawling with belated hypochondria. What a fool he had been—touching the rope, the boat, the wheelbarrow, riding in the ambulance. There were a thousand ways he could have picked up a few stray micro-organisms lingering from a dermie's touch. And now, he lay here in this nest of disease....

But strange—it was the most peaceful, the sanest place he'd seen in months. The religious orders simply accepted the plague—with masochistic complacency perhaps—but calmly. A cross, or a penance, or something. But no, they seemed to accept it almost gladly. Nothing peculiar about that. All dermies went wild-eyed with happiness about the "lovely desire" they possessed. The priests weren't wild-eyed.

Neither was normal man equipped with socially-shaped sexual desire. Sublimation?

"Peace," he muttered, and went to sleep.

A knocking at the door awoke him at dawn. He grunted at it disgustedly and sat up in bed. The door, which he had forgotten to lock, swung open. A chubby nun with a breakfast tray started into the room. She saw his face, then stopped. She closed her eyes, wrinkled her nose, and framed a silent prayer with her lips. Then she backed slowly out.

"I'm sorry, sir!" she quavered through the door. "I—I knew there was a patient in here, but I didn't know...you weren't a hyper. Forgive me."

He heard her scurrying away down the hall. Somehow, he began to feel safe. But wasn't that exactly what they wanted him to feel! He realized suddenly that he was trapped. He had left the shotgun in the emergency room. What was he—guest or captive? Months of fleeing from the gray terror had left him suspicious.

Soon he would find out. He arose and—began—dressing. Before he finished, Mendelhaus came. He did not enter, but stood in the hallway beyond the door. He smiled a faint greeting, and said, "So you're Paul?"

He felt heat rising in his face. "She's awake, then?" he asked gruffly.

The priest nodded. "Want to see her?"

"No, I've got to be going."

"It would do her good."

He coughed angrily. Why did the black-cassocked dermie have to put it that way? "Well it wouldn't do me any good!" he snarled. "I've been around too many gray-leather hides already!"

MENDELHAUS shrugged, but his eyes bore a hint of contempt. "As you wish. You may leave by the outside stairway—to avoid disturbing the sisters."

"To avoid being touched, you mean!"

"No one will touch you."

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Paul finished dressing in silence. The reversal of attitudes disturbed him. He resented the seeming "tolerance" that was being extended him. It was like asylum inmates being "tolerant" of the psychiatrist.

"I'm ready!" he growled.

Mendelhaus led him down the corridor and out into a sunlit balcony. They descended a stone stairway while the priest talked over his shoulder.

"She's still not fully rational, and there's some fever. It wouldn't be anything to worry about two years ago, but now we're out of most of the latest drugs. If sulfa won't hold the infection, we'll have to amputate, of course. We should know in two or three days."

He paused and looked back at Paul, who had stopped on the stairway. "Coming?"

"Where is she?" Paul asked weakly. "I'll see her."

The priest frowned. "You don't have to, son. I'm sorry if I implied any obligation on your part. Really, you've done enough. I gather that you saved her life. Very few non-hypers would do a thing like that. I—"

"Where is she?" he snapped angrily.

The priest nodded. "Downstairs. Come on."

As they reentered the building on the ground floor, the priest cupped his hands to his mouth and called out, "Non-hyper coming! Plug your noses, or get out of the way! Avoid circumstances of temptation!"

When they moved along the corridor, it was Paul who felt like the leper. Mendelhaus led him into the third room.

Willie saw him enter and hid her gray hands beneath the sheet. She smiled faintly, tried to sit up, and failed. Williamson and a nun-nurse who had both been standing by the bedside turned to leave the room. Mendelhaus followed them out and closed the door.

There was a long, painful pause. Willie tried to grin. He shuffled his feet.

"They've got me in a cast," she said conversationally.

"You'll be all right," he said hastily. "It won't be long before you'll be up. Galveston's a good place for you. They're all dermies here."

She clenched her eyes tightly shut. "God! God! I hope I never hear that word again. After last night...that old woman in the rocking chair... I stayed there all alone...and the wind'd start the chair rocking. Ooh!" She looked at him with abnormally bright eyes. "I'd rather die than touch anybody now...after seeing that. Somebody touched her, didn't they, Paul? That's why she did it, wasn't it?"

He squirmed and backed toward the door. "Willie...I'm sorry for what I said. I mean—"

"Don't worry, Paul! I wouldn't touch you now." She clenched her hands and brought them up before her face, to stare at them with glittering hate. "I loathe myself!" she hissed.

WHAT WAS it Mendelhaus had said, about the dermie going insane because of being an outcast rather than because of the plague? But she wouldn't be an outcast here. Only among non-hypers, like himself...

"Get well quick, Willie," he muttered, then hurriedly slipped out into the corridor. She called his name twice, then fell silent.

"That was quick," murmured Mendelhaus, glancing at his pale face.

"Where can I get a car?"

The priest rubbed his chin. "I was just speaking to Brother Matthew about that. Uh...how would you like to have a small yacht instead?"

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Paul caught his breath. A yacht would mean access to the seas, and to an island. A yacht was the perfect solution. He stammered gratefully.

"Good," said Mendelhaus. "There's a small craft in drydock down at the basin. It was apparently left there because there weren't any dock crews around to get her afloat again. I took the liberty of asking Brother Matthew to find some men and get her in the water."

"Dermies?"

"Of course. The boat will be fumigated, but it isn't really necessary. The infection dies out in a few hours. It'll take a while, of course, to get the boat ready. Tomorrow...next day, maybe. Bottom's cracked; it'll need some patching."

Paul's smile weakened. More delay. Two more days of living in the gray shadow. Was the priest really to be trusted?—Why should he even provide the boat? The jaws of an invisible trap, slowly closing.

Mendelhaus saw his doubt. "If you'd rather leave now, you're free to do so. We're really not going to as much trouble as it might seem. There are several yachts at the dock; Brother Matthew's been preparing to clean one or two up for our own use. And we might as well let you have one. They've been deserted by their owners. And...well...you helped the girl when nobody else would have done so. Consider the boat as our way of returning the favor, eh?"

A yacht. The open sea. A semi-tropical island, uninhabited, on the brink of the Caribbean. And a woman of course—chosen from among the many who would be willing to share such an escape. Peculiarly, he glanced at Willie's door. It was too bad about her. But she'd get along okay. The yacht...if he were only certain of Mendelhaus' intentions...

The priest began frowning at Paul's hesitation. "Well?"

"I don't want to put you to any trouble..."

"Nonsense! You're still afraid of us! Very well, come with me. There's someone I want you to see." Mendelhaus turned and started down the corridor.

Paul lingered. "Who...what—"

"Come on!" the priest snapped impatiently.

RELUCTANTLY, Paul followed him to the stairway. They descended to a gloomy basement and entered a smelly laboratory through a double-door. Electric illumination startled him; then he heard the sound of a gasoline engine and knew that the power was generated locally.

"Germicidal lamps," murmured the priest, following his ceilingward gaze. "Some of them are. Don't worry about touching things. It's sterile in here."

"But it's not sterile for your convenience," growled an invisible voice. "And it won't be sterile at all if you don't stay out! Beat it, preacher."

Paul looked for the source of the voice, and saw a small, short-necked man bending his shaggy gray head over a microscope at the other end of the lab. He had spoken without glancing up at his visitors.

"This is Doctor Seevers, of Princeton, son," said the priest, unruffled by the scientist's ire. "Claims he's an atheist, but personally I think he's a puritan. Doctor, this is the young man I was telling you about. Will you tell him what you know about neuroderm?"

Seevers jotted something on a pad, but kept his eye to the instrument. "Why don't we just give it to him, and let him find out for himself?" the scientist grumbled sadistically.

"Don't frighten him, you heretic! I

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brought him here to be illuminated."

"Illuminate him yourself. I'm busy. And stop calling me names. I'm not an atheist; I'm a bio-chemist."

"Yesterday you were a bio-physicist. Now, entertain my young man." Mendelhaus blocked the doorway with his body. Paul, with his jaw clenched angrily, had turned to leave.

"That's all I can do, preacher," Seevers grunted. "Entertain him. I know nothing. Absolutely nothing. I have some observed data. I have noticed some correlations. I have seen things happen. I have traced the patterns of the happenings and found some probable common denominators. And that is all! I know absolutely nothing, and I admit it. Why don't you preachers admit it in your racket?"

"Seevers, as you can see, is inordinately proud of his humility—if that's not a paradox," the priest said to Paul.

"Now, doctor, this young man—"

Seevers heaved a resigned sigh. His voice went sour-sweet. "All right, sit down, young man. I'll entertain you as soon as I get through counting free nerve-endings in this piece of skin."

Mendelhaus winked at his guest. "Seevers calls it masochism when we observe a fast-day or do penance. And there he sits, ripping off patches of his own hide to look at through his peeping glass. Masochism—heh!"

"Get out, preacher!" the scientist bellowed.

Mendelhaus laughed mockingly, nodded Paul toward a chair, and left the lab. Paul sat uneasily watching the back of Seever's lab jacket.

"Nice bunch of people really—these black-frocked yahoos," Seevers murmured conversationally. "If they'd just stop trying to convert me."

"Doctor Seevers, maybe I'd better—"

"Quiet! You bother me. And sit still, I can't stand to have people running in and out of here. You're in; now stay in."

PAUL FELL silent. He was uncertain whether or not Seevers was a dermie. The small man's lab jacket bunched up to hide the back of his neck, and the sleeves covered his arms. His hands were rubber-gloved, and a knot of white cord behind his head told Paul that he was wearing a gauze mask. His ears were bright pink, but their color was meaningless; it took several months for the gray coloring to seep to all areas of the skin. But Paul guessed he was a dermie—and wearing the gloves and mask to keep his equipment sterile.

He glanced idly around the large room. There were several glass cages of rats against the wall. They seemed air-tight, with ducts for forced ventilation. About half the rats were afflicted with neuroderm in its various stages. A few wore shaved patches of skin where the disease had been freshly and forcibly inflicted. Paul caught the fleeting impression that several of the animals were staring at him fixedly. He shuddered and looked away.

He glanced casually at the usual maze of laboratory glassware, then turned his attention to a pair of hemispheres, suspended like a trophy on the wall. He recognized them as the twin halves of one of the meteorites, with the small jelly-pocket in the center. Beyond it hung a large picture frame containing several typewritten sheets. Another frame held four pictures of bearded scientists from another century, obviously clipped from magazine or textbook. There was nothing spectacular about the lab. It smelled of clean dust and sour things. Just a small respectable workshop.

Seevers' chair creaked suddenly. "It checks," he said to himself. "It checks

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again. Forty per cent increase." He threw down the stub pencil and whirled suddenly. Paul saw a pudgy round face with glittering eyes. A dark splotch of neuroderm had crept up from his chin to split his mouth and cover one cheek and an eye, giving him the appearance of a black and white bulldog with a mixed color muzzle.

"It checks," he barked at Paul, then smirked contentedly.

"What checks?"

THE SCIENTIST rolled up a sleeve to display a patch of adhesive tape on a portion of his arm which had been discolored by the disease. "Here," he grunted. "Two weeks ago this area was normal. I took a centimeter of skin from right next to this one, and counted the nerve endings. Since that time, the derm's crept down over the area. I took another square centimeter today, and recounted. Forty per cent increase."

Paul frowned with unbelief. It was generally known that neuroderm had a sensitizing effect, but new nerve endings... No. He didn't believe it.

"Third time I've checked it," Seevers said happily. "One place ran up to sixty-five per cent. Heh! Smart little bugs, aren't they? Inventing new somesthetic receptors that way!"

Paul swallowed with difficulty. "What did you say?" he gasped.

Seevers inspected him serenely. "So you're a non-hyper, are you? Yes, indeed, I can smell that you are. Vile, really. Can't understand why sensible hypers would want to paw you. But then, I've insured myself against such foolishness."

He said it so casually that Paul blinked before he caught the full impact of it. "Y-y-you've done what?"

"What I said. When I first caught it, I simply sat down with a velvet-tipped stylus and located the spots on my hands that gave rise to pleasureable sensations. Then I burned them out with an electric needle. There aren't many of them, really—one or two points per square centimeter." He tugged off his gloves and exhibited pock-marked palms to prove it. "I didn't want to be bothered with such silly urges. Waste of time, chasing non-hypers—for me it is. I never learned what it's like, so I've never missed it." He turned his hands over and stared at them. "Stubborn little critters keep growing new ones, and I keep burning them out."

Paul leaped to his feet. "Are you trying to tell me that the plague causes new nerve cells to grow?"

Seevers looked up coldly. "Ah, yes. You came here to be illoooominated, as the padre put it. If you wish to be de-idiotized, please stop shouting. Otherwise, I'll ask you to leave."

Paul, who had felt like leaving a moment ago, now subsided quickly. "I'm sorry," he snapped, then softened his tone to repeat: "I'm sorry."

Seevers took a deep breath, stretched his short meaty arms in an unexpected yawn, then relaxed and grinned. "Sit down, sit down, m'boy. I'll tell you what you want to know, if you really want to know anything. Do you?"

"Of course!"

"You don't! You just want to know how you—whatever your name is—will be affected by events. You don't care about understanding for its own sake. Few people do. That's why we're in this mess. The padre now—he cares about understanding events—but not for their own sake. He cares—but for his flock's sake and for his God's sake—which is, I must admit, a better attitude than that of the common herd, whose only interest is in their own safety. But if people would just

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want to understand events for the understanding's sake—we wouldn't be in such a pickle."

PAUL WATCHED the professor's bright eyes and took the lecture quietly.

"And so, before I illuminate you, I want to make an impossible request."

"Yes, sir."

"I ask you to be completely objective," Seevers continued, rubbing the bridge of his nose and covering his eyes with his hand. "I want you to forget you ever heard of neuroderm while you listen to me. Rid yourself of all preconceptions, especially those connected with fear. Pretend these are purely hypothetical events that I'm going to discuss." He took his hands down from his eyes and grinned sheepishly. "It always embarrasses me to ask for that kind of cooperation when I know damn well I'll never get it."

"I'll try to be objective, sir."

"Bah!" Seevers slid down to sit on his spine, and hooked the base of his skull over the back of the chair. He blinked thoughtfully at the ceiling for a moment, then folded his hands across his small paunch and closed his eyes.

When he spoke again, he was speaking to himself: "Assume a planet, somewhat earthlike, but not quite. It has carboniferous life forms, but not human. Warm blooded, probably, and semi-intelligent. And the planet has something else—it has an overabundance of parasite forms. Actually, the various types of parasites are the dominant species. The warm blooded animals are the parasites' vegetables, so to speak. Now, during two billion years, say, of survival contests between parasite species, some parasites are quite likely to develop some curious methods of adaptation. Methods of insuring the food supply—animals, who must have been taking a beating."

Seevers glanced down from the ceiling. "Tell me, youngster, what major activity did Man invent to secure his vegetable food supply?"

"Agriculture?"

"Certainly. Man is a parasite, as far as vegetables are concerned. But he learned to eat his cake and have it, too. He learned to perpetuate the species he was devouring. A very remarkable idea, if you stop to think about it. Very!"

"I don't see—"

"Hush! Now, let's suppose that one species of micro-parasites on our hypothetical planet learned, through long evolutionary processes, to stimulate regrowth in the animal tissue they devoured. Through exuding controlled amounts of growth hormone, I think. Quite an advancement, eh?"

Paul had begun leaning forward tensely.

"But it's only the first step. It let the host live longer, although not pleasantly, I imagine. The growth control would be clumsy at first. But soon, all parasite-species either learned to do it, or died out. Then came the contest for the best kind of control. The parasites who kept their hosts in the best physical condition naturally did a better job of survival—since the parasite-ascendency had cut down on the food supply, just as Man wastes his own resources. And since animals were contending among themselves for a place in the sun, it was to the parasite's advantage to help insure the survival of his host-species—through growth control."

SEEVERS WINKED solemnly. "Now begins the downfall of the parasites—their decadence. They concentrated all their efforts along the lines of...uh...scientific farming, you might say. They began growing

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various sorts of defense and attack weapons for their hosts—weird bio-devices, perhaps. Horns, swords, fangs, stingers, poison-throwers—we can only guess. But eventually, one group of parasites hit upon—what?"

Paul, who was beginning to stir uneasily, could only stammer. Where was Seevers getting all this?

"Say it!" the scientist demanded.

"The. . . nervous system?"

"That's right. You don't need to whisper it. The nervous sytem. It was probably an unsuccessful parasite at first, because nerve tissue grows slowly. And it's a long stretch of evolution between a microspecies which could stimulate nerve growth and one which could direct and utilize that growth for the host's advantage—and for its own. But at last, after a long struggle, our little species gets there. It begins sharpening the host's senses, building up complex senses from aggregates of old style receptors, and increasing the host's intelligence within limits."

Seevers grinned mischievously. "Comes a planetary shake-up of the first magnitude. Such parasites would naturally pick the host species with the highest intelligence to begin with. With the extra boost, this brainy animal quickly beats down its own enemies, and consequently the enemies of its micro-benefactor. It puts itself in much the same position that Man's in on Earth—lord it over the beasts, divine right to run the place, and all that. Now understand—it's the animal who's become intelligent, not the parasites. The parasites are operating on complex instinct patterns, like a hive of bees. They're wonderful neurological engineers—like bees are good structural engineers; blind instinct, accumulated through evolution."

He paused to light a cigarette. "If you feel ill, young man, there's drinking water in that bottle. You look ill."

"I'm all right!"

"Well, to continue: The intelligent animal became master of his planet. Threats to his existence were overcome—unless he was a threat to himself, like we are. But now, the parasites had found a safe home. No new threats to force readaptation. They sat back and sighed and became stagnant—as unchanging as horseshoe crabs or amoeba or other Earth ancients. They kept right on working in their neurological beehives, and now they became cultivated by the animal, who recognized their benefactors. The bugs didn't know it, but they were no longer the dominant species. They had insured their survival by leaning on their animal prop, who now took care of them with godlike charity—and selfishness. The parasites had achieved biological heaven. They kept on working, but they stopped fighting. The host was their welfare state, you might say. End of a sequence."

HE BLEW a long breath of smoke and leaned forward to watch Paul with casual amusement. Paul suddenly realized that he was sitting on the edge of his chair and gaping. He forced a relaxation.

"Wild guesswork," he breathed uncertainly.

"Some of it's guesswork," Seevers admitted. "But none of it's wild. There is supporting evidence. It's in the form of a message."

"Message?"

"Sure. Come, I'll show you." Seevers arose and moved toward the wall. He stopped before the two hemispheres. "On second thought, you better show yourself. Take down that sliced meteorite, will you? It's sterile."

Paul crossed the room, climbed unsteadily upon a bench, and brought

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down the globular meteorite. It was the first time he had examined one of the things, and he inspected it curiously. It was a near-perfect sphere, about eight inches in diameter, with a four inch hollow in the center. The globe was made up of several concentric shells, tightly fitted, each apparently of a different metal. It was not seemingly heavier than aluminum, although the outer shell was obviously of tough steel.

"Set it face down," Seever told him. Both halves. Give it a quick little twist. The shells will come apart. Take out the center shell—the hard, thin one between the soft protecting shells."

"How do you know their purposes?" Paul growled as he followed instructions. The shells came apart easily.

"Envelopes are to protect messages," snorted Seevers.

Paul snorted out the hemispheres, and found two mirror-polished shells of paper thin tough metal. They bore no inscription, either inside or out. He gave Seevers a puzzled frown.

"Handle them carefully while they're out of the protectors. They're already a little blurred..."

"I don't see any message."

"There's a small bottle of iron filings in that drawer by your knee. Sift them carefully over the outside of the shells. That powder isn't fine enough, really, but it's the best I could do. Felger had some better stuff up at Princeton, before we all got out. This business wasn't my discovery, incidentally."

BAFFLED, PAUL found the iron filings and dusted the mirror-shells with the powder. Delicate patterns appeared—latitudinal circles, etched in iron dust and laced here and there with diagonal lines. He gasped. It looked like the map of a planet.

"I know what you're thinking," Seevers said. "That's what we thought too, at first. Then Felger came up with this very fine dust. Fine as they are, those lines are rows of pictograph symbols. You can make them out vaguely with a good reading glass, even with this coarse stuff. It's magnetic printing—like two-dimensional wire-recording. Evidently, the animals that printed it had either very powerful eyes, or a magnetic sense."

"Anyone understand it?"

"Princeton staff was working on it when the world went crazy. They figured out enough to guess at what I've just told you. They found five different shell-messages among a dozen or so spheres. One of them was a sort of key. A symbol equated to a diagram of a carbon atom. Another symbol equated to pi in binary numbers. Things like that—about five hundred symbols, in fact. Some we couldn't figure. Then they defined other symbols by what amounted to blank-filling quizzes. Things like—"A star is..." and there would be the unknown symbol. We would try to decide whether it meant "hot", "white", "huge", and so forth."

"And you managed it?"

"In part. The ruthless way in which the missiles were opened destroyed some of the clarity. The senders were guilty of their own brand of anthropomorphism. They projected their own psychology on us. They expected us to open the things shell by shell, cautiously, and figure out the text before we went further. Heh! What happens. Some machinist grabs one, shakes it, weighs it, sticks it on a lathe, and—brrrrrrr! Our curiosity is still rather ape-like. Stick our arm in a gopher hole to see if there's a rattlesnake inside."

There was a long silence while Paul stood peering over the patterns on the

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shell. "Why haven't people heard about this?" he asked quietly.

"Heard about it!" Seevers roared. "And how do you propose to tell them about it?"

Paul shook his head. It was easy to forget that Man had scurried away from his presses and his broadcasting stations and his railroads, leaving his mechanical creatures to sleep in their own rust while he fled like a bee-stung bear before the strange terror.

"What, exactly, do the patterns say, doctor?"

"I've told you some of it—the evolutionary origin of the neuroderm parasites. We also pieced together their reasons for launching the missiles across space—several thousand years ago. Their sun was about to flare into a super-nova. They worked out a theoretical space-drive, but they couldn't fuel it—needed some element that was scarce in their system. They could get to their outer planet, but that wouldn't help much. So they just cultured up a batch of their parasite-benefactors, rolled them into these balls, and fired them like charges of buckshot at various stars. Interception-course, naturally. They meant to miss just a little, so that the projectiles would swing into long elliptical orbits around the suns—close enough in to intersect the radiational 'life-belt' and eventually cross paths with planets whose orbits were near-circular. Looks like they hit us on the first pass."

"You mean they weren't aiming at Earth in particular?"

"Evidently not. They couldn't know we were here. Not at a range like that. Hundreds of light years. They just took a chance on several stars. Shipping off their pets was sort of a last ditch stand against extinction—symbolic, to be sure—but a noble gesture, as far as they were concerned. A giving away of part of their souls. Like a man writing his will and leaving his last worldly possession to some unknown species beyond the stars. Imagine them standing there—watching the projectiles being fired out toward deep space. There goes their inheritance, to an unknown heir, or perhaps to no one. The little creatures that brought them up from beasthood."

SEEVERS PAUSED, staring up at the sunlight beyond the high basement window. He was talking to himself again, quietly: "You can see them turn away and silently go back . . . to wait for their collapsing sun to reach the critical point, the detonating point. They've left their last mark—a dark and uncertain benediction to the cosmos."

"You're a fool, Seevers," Paul grunted suddenly.

Seevers whirled, whitening. His hand darted out forgetfully toward the young man's arm, but he drew it back as Paul sidesteped.

"You actually regard this thing as desirable, don't you?" Paul asked. "You can't see that you're under its effect. Why does it affect people that way? And you say I can't be objective."

The professor smiled coldly. "I didn't say it's desirable. I was simply pointing out that the beings who sent it saw it as desirable. They were making some unwarranted assumptions.

"Maybe they just didn't care."

"Of course they care. Their fallacy was that we would open it as they would have done—cautiously. Perhaps they couldn't see how a creature could be both brash and intelligent. They meant for us to read the warning on the shells before we went further."

"Warning . . . ?"

Seevers smiled bitterly. "Yes, warning. There was one group of oversized symbols on all the spheres. See

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that pattern on the top ring? It says, in effect—'Finder-creatures, you who destroy your own people—if you do this thing, then destroy this container without penetrating deeper. If you are self-destroyers, then the contents will only help to destroy you.' "

There was a frigid silence.

"But somebody would have opened one anyway," Paul protested.

Seevers turned his bitter smile on the window. "You couldn't be more right. The senders just didn't forsee our monkey-minded species. If they saw Man digging out the nuggets, braying over them, chortling over them, cracking them like walnuts, then turning tail to run howling for the forests—well, they'd think twice before they fired another round of their celestial buckshot."

"Doctor Seevers, what do you think will happen now? To the world, I mean."

Seevers shrugged. "I saw a baby born yesterday—to a woman down the island. It was fully covered with neuroderm at birth. It has some new sensory equipment—small pores in the finger tips, with taste buds and olfactory cells in them. Also a nodule above each eye sensitive to infra-red."

Paul groaned.

"It's not the first case. Those things are happening in adults, too, but you have to have the condition for quite a while. Brother Thomas has the finger pores already. Hasn't learned to use them yet, of course. He gets sensations from them, but the receptors aren't connected to olfactory and taste centers of the brain. They're still linked with the somesthetic interpretive centers. He can touch various substances and get different perceptive combinations of heat, pain, cold, pressure, and so forth. He says vinegar feels ice-cold, quinine sharp-hot, cologne warm-velvet-prickly, and...he blushes when he touches a musky perfume."

Paul laughed, and the hollow sound startled him.

"It may be several generations before we know all that will happen," Seevers went on. "I've examined sections of rat brain and found the microorganisms. They may be working at rerouting these new receptors to proper brain areas. Our grandchildren—if Man's still on Earth by then—can perhaps taste analyze substances by touch, qualitatively determine the contents of a test tube by sticking a finger in it. See a warm radiator in a dark room—by infra-red. Perhaps there'll be some ultra-violet sensitization. My rats are sensitive to it."

PAUL WENT to the rat cages and stared in at three grey-pelted animals that seemed larger than the others. They retreated against the back wall and watched him warily. They began squeaking and exchanging glances among themselves.

"Those are third-generation hypers," Seevers told him. "They've developed a simple language. Not intelligent by human standards, but crafty. They've learned to use their sensory equipment. They know when I mean to feed them, and when I mean to take one out to kill and dissect. A slight change in my emotional odor, I imagine. Learning's the big hurdle, youngster. A hyper with finger pores gets sensations from them, but it takes a long time to attach meaning to the various sensations—through learning. A baby gets visual sensations from his untrained eyes—but the sensation is utterly without significance until he associates milk with white, mother with a face shape, and so forth."

"What will happen to the brain?" Paul breathed.

"Not too much, I imagine. I haven't

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observed much happening. The rats show an increase in intelligence, but not in brain size. The intellectual boost apparently comes from an ability to perceive things in terms of more senses. Ideas, concepts, precepts—are made of memory collections of past sensory experiences. An apple is red, fruity-smelling, sweet-acid flavored—that's your sensory idea of an apple. A blind man without a tongue couldn't form such a complete idea. A hyper, on the other hand, could add some new adjectives that you couldn't understand. The fully-developed hyper—I'm not one yet—has more sensory tools with which to grasp ideas. When he learns to use them, he'll be mentally more efficient. But there's apparently a hitch.

"The parasite's instinctive goal is to insure the host's survival—the individual host's survival. That's the substance of the warning. If Man has the capacity to work together, then the parasites will help him shape his environment. If Man intends to keep fighting with his fellows, the parasite will help him do a better job of that, too. Help him destroy himself more efficiently."

"Men have worked together—"

"In small tribes," Seevers interrupted. "Yes, we have group spirit. Ape-tribe spirit, not race spirit."

Paul moved restlessly toward the door. Seevers had turned to watch him with a cool smirk.

"Well, you're illuminated, youngster. Now what do you intend to do?"

PAUL SHOOK his head to scatter the confusion of ideas. "What can anyone do? Except run. To an island, perhaps."

Seevers hoisted a cynical eyebrow. "Intend taking the condition with you? Or will you try to stay non-hyper?"

"Take...are you crazy? I mean to stay healthy!"

"That's what I thought. If you were objective about this, you'd give yourself the condition and get it over with. I did. You remind me of a monkey running away from a hypodermic needle. The hypo has serum health-insurance in it, but the needle looks sharp. The monkey chatters with fright."

Paul stalked angrily to the door, then paused. "There's a girl upstairs, a dermie. Would you—"

"Tell her all this? I always brief new hypers. It's one of my duties around this ecclesiastical leper-ranch. She's on the verge of insanity, I suppose. They all are, before they get rid of the idea that they're damned souls. What's she to you?"

Paul strode out into the corridor without answering. He felt physically ill. He hated Seevers' smug bulldog face with a violence that was unfamiliar to him. The man had given the plague to himself! So he said. But was it true? Was any of it true? To claim that the hallucinations were new sensory phenomena, to pose the plague as possibly desirable—Seevers had no patent on those ideas. Every dermie made such claims; it was a symptom. Seevers had simply invented clever rationalizations to support his delusions, and Paul had been nearly taken in. Seevers was clever. *Do you mean to take the condition with you when you go?* Wasn't that just another way of suggesting, "Why don't you allow me to touch you?" Paul was shivering as he returned to the third floor room to recoat himself with the pungent oil. Why not leave now? he thought.

But he spent the day wandering along the waterfront, stopping briefly at the docks to watch a crew of monks scrambling over the scaffolding that surrounded the hulls of two small sea-going vessels. The monks were caulk-

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ing split seams and trotting along the platforms with buckets of tar and paint. Upon inquiry, Paul learned which of the vessels was intended for his own use. And he put aside all thoughts of immediate departure.

She was a fifty-footer, a slender craft with a weighted fin-keel that would cut too deep for bay-navigation. Paul guessed that the colony wanted only a flat-bottomed vessel for hauling passengers and cargo across from the mainland. They would have little use for the trim seaster with the lines of a baby destroyer. Upon closer examination, he guessed that it had been a police-boat, or Coast Guard craft. There was a gun-mounting on the forward deck, minus the gun. She was built for speed, and powered by diesels, and she could be provisioned for a nice long cruise.

PAUL WENT to scrounge among the warehouses and locate a stock of supplies. He met an occasional monk or nun, but the gray-skinned monastics seemed only desirous of avoiding him. The dermie desire was keyed principally by smell, and the deodorant oil helped preserve him from their affections. Once he was approached by a wild-eyed layman who startled him amidst a heap of warehouse crates. The dermie was almost upon him before Paul heard the footfall. Caught without an escape route, and assailed by startled terror, he shattered the man's arm with a shot-gun blast, then fled from the warehouse to escape the dermie's screams.

Choking with shame, he found a dermie monk and sent him to care for the wounded creature. Paul had shot at other plague victims when there was no escape, but never with intent to kill. The man's life had been spared only by hasty aim.

"It was self-defense," he reminded himself.

But defense against what? Against the inevitable?

He hurried back to the hospital and found Mendelhaus outside the small chapel. "I better not wait for your boat," he told the priest. "I just shot one of your people. I better leave before it happens again."

Mendelhaus' thin lips tightened. "You shot—"

"Didn't kill him," Paul explained hastily. "Broke his arm. One of the brothers is bringing him over. I'm sorry, Father, but he jumped me."

The priest glanced aside silently, apparently wrestling against anger. "I'm glad you told me," he said quietly. "I suppose you couldn't help it. But why did you leave the hospital? You're safe here. The yacht will be provisioned for you. I suggest you remain in your room until it's ready. I won't vouch for your safety any farther than the building." There was a tone of command in his voice, and Paul nodded slowly. He started away.

"The young lady's been asking for you," the priest called after him.

Paul stopped. "How is she?"

"Over the crisis, I think. Infection's down. Nervous condition not so good. Deep depression. Sometimes she goes a little hysterical." He paused, then lowered his voice. "You're at the focus of it, young man. Sometimes she gets the idea that she touched you, and then sometimes she raves about how she wouldn't do it."

PAUL WHIRLED angrily, forming a protest, but the priest continued: "Seevers talked to her, and then a psychologist—one of our sisters. It seemed to help some. She's asleep now. I don't know how much of Seevers' talk she understood, however. She's dazed—combined effects of pain, shock, infec-

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tion, guilt-feelings, fright, hysteria—and some other things. Morphine doesn't make her mind any clearer. Neither does the fact that she thinks you're avoiding her."

"It's the plague I'm avoiding!" Paul snapped. "Not her."

Mendelhaus chuckled mirthlessly. "You're talking to me, aren't you?" He turned and entered the chapel through a swinging door. As the door fanned back and forth, Paul caught a glimpse of a candle-lit altar and a stark wooden crucifix, and a sea of monk-robes flowing over the pews, waiting for the celebrant priest to enter the sanctuary and begin the Sacrifice of the Mass. He realized vaguely that it was Sunday.

Paul wandered back to the main corridor and found himself drifting toward Willie's room. The door was ajar, and he stopped short lest she see him. But after a moment he inched forward until he caught a glimpse of her dark mass of hair unfurled across the pillow. One of the sisters had combed it for her, and it spread in dark waves, gleaming in the candlelight. She was still asleep. The candle startled him for an instant—suggesting a deathbed and the sacrament of the dying. But a dog-eared magazine lay beneath it; someone had been reading to her.

He stood in the doorway, watching the slow rise of her breathing. Fresh, young, shapely—even in the crude cotton gown they had given her, even beneath the blue-white pallor of her skin—soon to become gray as a cloudy sky on a wintery twilight. Her lips moved slightly, and he backed a step away. They paused, parted moistly, showing thin white teeth. Her delicately carved face was thrown back slightly on the pillow. There was a sudden tightening of her jaw.

A weirdly pitched voice floated unexpectedly from down the hall, echoing the semi-singing of Gregorian chant: *"Asperges me, Domine, hyssopo, et mundabor...."* The priest was beginning Mass.

AS THE sound came, the girl's hands clenched into rigid fists beneath the sheet. Her eyes flared open to stare wildly at the ceiling. Clutching the bedclothes, she pressed the fists up against her face and cried out: "No! Noooo! God, I won't!"

Paul backed out of sight and pressed himself against the wall. A knot of desolation tightened in his stomach. He looked around nervously. A nun, hearing the outcry, came scurrying down the hall, murmuring anxiously to herself. A plump mother hen in a dozen yards of starched white cloth. She gave him a quick challenging glance and waddled inside.

"Child, my child, what's wrong! Nightmares again?"

He heard Willie breathe a nervous moan of relief. Then her voice, weakly— "They...they made me... touch...Ooo, God! I want to cut off my hands!"

Paul fled, leaving the nun's sympathetic reassurance to fade into a murmur behind him.

He spent the rest of the day and the night in his room. On the following day, Mendelhaus came with word that the boat was not yet ready. They needed to finish caulking and stock it with provisions. But the priest assured him that it should be afloat within twenty-four hours. Paul could not bring himself to ask about the girl.

A monk brought his food—unopened cans, still steaming from the sterilizer, and on a covered tray. The monk wore gloves and mask, and he had oiled his own skin. There were moments when Paul felt as if he were the diseased and contagious patient from whom the others protected them-

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selves. Like Omar, he thought, wondering—"which is the Potter, pray, and which the Pot?"

Was Man, as Seevers implied, a terrorized ape-tribe fleeing illogically from the gray hands that only wanted to offer a blessing? How narrow was the line dividing blessing from curse, god from demon! The parasites came in a devil's mask, the mask of disease. "Diseases have often killed me," said Man. "All disease is therefore evil." But was that necessarily true? Fire had often killed Man's club-bearing ancestors, but later came to serve him. Even diseases had been used to good advantage—artificially induced typhoid and malaria to fight venereal infections.

But the gray skin...tastebuds in the fingertips...alien micro-organisms tampering with the nerves and the brain. Such concepts caused his scalp to bristle. Man—made over to suit the tastes of a bunch of supposedly beneficent parasites—was he still Man, or something else? Little bacteriological farmers imbedded in the skin, raising a crop of nerve-cells—eat one, plant two, sow an olfactor in a new field, reshuffle the feeder-fibers to the brain.

MONDAY brought a cold rain and stiff wind from the Gulf. He watched the water swirling through littered gutters in the street. Sitting in the window, he watched the gloom and waited, praying that the storm would not delay his departure. Mendelhaus smiled politely through his doorway once. "Willie's ankle seems healing nicely," he said. "Swelling's gone down so much we had to change casts. If only she would—"

"Thanks for the free report, padre," Paul growled irritably.

The priest shrugged and went away.

It was still raining when the sky darkened with evening. The monastic dock-crew had certainly been unable to finish. Tomorrow...perhaps.

After nightfall, he lit a candle and lay awake watching its unflickering yellow tongue until drowsiness lolled his head aside. He snuffed it out and went to bed.

Dreams assailed him, tormented him, stroked him with dark hands while he lay back, submitting freely. Small hands, soft, cool, tender—touching his forehead and his cheeks, while a voice whispered caresses.

He awoke suddenly to blackness. The feel of the dream-hands was still on his face. What had aroused him? A sound in the hall, a creaking hinge? The darkness was impenetrable. The rain had stopped—perhaps its cessation had disturbed him. He felt curiously tense as he lay listening to the humid, musty corridors. A...faint... rustle...and...

Breathing! The sound of soft breathing was in the room with him!

He let out a hoarse shriek that shattered the unearthly silence. A high-pitched scream of fright answered him! From a few feet away in the room. He groped toward it and fumbled against a bare wall. He roared curses, and tried to find first matches, then the shotgun. At last he found the gun, aimed at nothing across the room, and jerked the trigger. The explosion deafened him. The window shattered, and a sift of plaster rustled to the floor.

The brief flash had illuminated the room. It was empty. He stood frozen. Had he imagined it all? But no, the visitor's startled scream had been real enough.

A cool draft fanned his face. The door was open. Had he forgotten to lock it again? A tumult of sound was beginning to arise from the lower floors. His shot had aroused the sleepers. But there was a closer

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sound—sobbing in the corridor, and an irregular creaking noise.

At last he found a match and rushed to the door. But the tiny flame revealed nothing within its limited aura. He heard a doorknob rattle in the distance; his visitor was escaping via the outside stairway. He thought of pursuit and vengeance. But instead, he rushed to the wash-basin and began scrubbing himself thoroughly with harsh brown soap. Had his visitor touched him—or had the hands been only dream-stuff. He was frightened and sickened.

VOICES WERE filling the corridor. The light of several candles was advancing toward his doorway. He turned to see monks' faces peering anxiously inside. Father Mendelhaus shouldered his way through the others, glanced at the window, the wall, then at Paul.

"What—"

"Safety, eh?" Paul hissed. "Well, I had a prowler! A woman! I think I've been touched."

The priest turned and spoke to a monk. "Go to the stairway and call for the Mother Superior. Ask her to make an immediate inspection of the sisters' quarters. If any nuns have been out of their rooms—"

A shrill voice called from down the hallway: "Father, Father! The girl with the injured ankle! She's not in her bed! She's gone!"

"Willie!" Paul gasped.

A small nun with a candle scurried up and panted to recover her breath for a moment. "She's gone, Father. I was on night duty. I heard the shot, and I went to see if it disturbed her. She wasn't there!"

The priest grumbled incredulously. "How could she get out? She can't walk with that cast."

"Crutches, Father. We told her she could get up in a few days. While she was still irrational, she kept saying they were going to amputate her leg. We brought the crutches in to prove she'd be up soon. It's my fault, Father. I should have—"

"Never mind! Search the building for her."

Paul dried his wet skin and faced the priest angrily. "What can I do to disinfect myself?" he demanded.

Mendelhaus called out into the hallway where a crowd had gathered. "Someone please get Doctor Seevers."

"I'm here, preacher," grunted the scientist. The monastics parted ranks to make way for his short chubby body. He grinned amusedly at Paul. "So, you decided to make your home here after all, eh?"

Paul croaked an insult at him. "Have you got any effective—"

"Disinfectants? Afraid not. Nitric acid will do the trick on one or two local spots. Where were you touched?"

"I don't know. I was asleep."

Seevers' grin widened. "Well, you can't take a bath in nitric acid. We'll try something else, but I doubt if it'll work for a direct touch."

"That oil—"

"Uh-uh! That'll do for exposure-weakened parasites you might pick up by handling an object that's been touched. But with skin to skin contact, the bugs're pretty stout little rascals. Come on downstairs, though, we'll make a pass at it."

PAUL FOLLOWED him quickly down the corridor. Behind him, a soft voice was murmuring: "I just can't understand why non-hypers are so..." Mendelhaus said something to Seevers, blotting out the voice. Paul chafed at the thought that they might consider him cowardly.

But with the herds fleeing northward, conwardice was the social norm.

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And after a year's flight, Paul had accepted the norm as the only possible way to fight.

Seevers was emptying chemicals into a tub of water in the basement when a monk hurried in to tug at Mendelhaus' sleeve. "Father, the sisters report that the girl's not in the building."

"What? Well, she can't be far! Search the grounds. If she's not there, try the adjoining blocks."

Paul stopped unbuttoning his shirt. Willie had said some mournful things about what she would rather do than submit to the craving. And her startled scream when he had cried out in the darkness—the scream of someone suddenly awakening to reality—from a daze-world.

The monk left the room. Seevers sloshed more chemicals into the tub. Paul could hear the wind whipping about the basement windows and the growl of an angry surf not so far away. Paul rebuttoned his shirt.

"Which way's the ocean?" he asked suddenly. He backed toward the door.

"No, you fool!" roared Seevers. "You're not going to—*get him,* preacher!"

Paul sidestepped as the priest grabbed for him. He darted outside and began running for the stairs. Mendelhaus bellowed for him to stop.

"Not me!" Paul called back angrily. "Willie!"

Moments later, he was racing across the sodden lawn and into the street. He stopped on the corner to get his bearings. The wind brought the sound of the surf with it. He began running east and calling her name into the night.

The rain had ceased, but the pavement was wet and water gurgled in the gutters. Occasionally the moon peered through the thinning veil of clouds, but its light failed to furnish a view of the street ahead. After a minute's running, he found himself standing on the seawall. The breakers thundered a stone's throw across the sand. For a moment they became visible under the coy moon, then vanished again in blackness. He had not seen her.

"Willie!"

Only the breaker's growl responded. And a glimmer of phosphorescence from the waves.

"WILLIE!" He slipped down from the seawall and began feeling along the jagged rocks that lay beneath it. She could not have gotten down without falling. Then he remembered a rickety flight of steps just to the north, and he trotted quickly toward it.

THE MOON came out suddenly. He saw her, and stopped. She was sitting motionless on the bottom step, holding her face in her hands. The crutches were stacked neatly against the hand rail. Ten yards acoss the sand slope lay the hungry, devouring surf. Paul approached her slowly. The moon went out again. His feet sucked at the rain-soaked sand.

He stopped by the hand rail, peering at her motionless shadow. "Willie?"

A low moan, then a long silence. "I did it, Paul," she muttered miserably. "It was like a dream at first, but then...you shouted...and..."

He crouched in front of her, sitting on his heels. Then he took her wrists firmly and tugged her hands from her face.

"Don't..."

He pulled her close and kissed her. Her mouth was frightened. Then he lifted her—being cautious of the now-sodden cast. He climbed the steps and started back to the hospital.

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Willie, dazed and weary and still uncomprehending, fell asleep in his arms. Her hair blew about his face in the wind. It smelled warm and alive. He wondered what sensation it would produce to the finger-pore receptors. "Wait and see," he said to himself.

The priest met him with a growing grin when he brought her into the candlelit corridor. "Shall we forget the boat, son?"

Paul paused. "No . . . I'd like to borrow it anyway."

Mendelhaus looked puzzled.

Seevers snorted at him: "Preacher, don't you know any reasons for travelling besides running away?"

Paul carried her back to her room. He meant to have a long talk when she awoke. About an island—until the world sobered up.

THE END

By Peter Dakin

A means OX

A story of the alphabet

AN ALPHABET is a collection of the signs for the sounds of a language. They form the words used to express the ideas which the language as a whole conveys. The characters of the different languages form the vehicle of communication. Since the first primitive man scratched his crude pictographs on stone and clay and paper, more than two hundred and fifty alphabets have been created and have been used as a means of expressing thought. About fifty of this number have survived and are now in use. And at least one half of the fifty are found in India, where their use is both restricted and local. The remaining twenty-five are variations of three major scripts which represent Roman, Arabic, and Chinese characters which are in use today. The one which represents our highest culture is that of the Roman.

It is practically an impossibility to trace the origin of and the changes in each of the letters of the English alphabet. There is no one place or time where the characters of our alphabet began, so that a scale of their derivation cannot be produced. All of these characters have been formed as a result of necessity, and each has passed through many changes and adaptations in both form and meaning, and has developed through centuries of slow and almost inperceptible growth.

The characters used in the English alphabet can be traced to the Phoenicians, the trading branch of the Semites, but no further. The Phoenician alphabet that was carried to the Greeks consisted of twenty-two characters, only three or four of which correspond in form to the letters of the English alphabet in use today. Apparently, these letters labeled objects or things about the ancient peoples. Aleph meant ox; Beth, house; Deleth, door; Jodh, hand; Kah, hollow of the hand; Mun; water; Rosh, head; Shin, tooth. These are examples of the original meaning of some of these Phoenician characters, but this does not mean that their origin is lodged with the Phoenicians.

Scholars have attempted to identify the Phoenician letters with characters representing Egyptian hieroglyphics. Emanuel de Rouge, a French philologist, tried to prove that the source of the alphabet was to be found in the hieratic characters shown in one of the early Egyptian documents. Canon Isaac Taylor in THE ALPHABET (which is regarded as the most complete treatise in English on this subject) agrees with de Rouge. Edward Clodd in his THE STORY OF THE ALPHABET, challenged and denied this opinion. Other writers have tried to show a connection between the Phoenician alphabet and the cuneiform systems of Assyria and Babylon. The early Babylonian characters which are supposed to furnish evidence of the origin of the Phoenician alphabet are about 2,000 years older than the earliest Phoenician inscriptions, and they had been subjected to many changes during this time.

Trade relations between peoples of different habits and customs leave certain distinguishing marks and influences borrowed from each other. There is evidence that the Phoenicians had trade intercourse with both the Egyptians and Babylonians, because some of the early Phoenician characters making up the Phoenician alphabet resemble some of the characters used by the early Egyptians and Babylonians.

At present, the evidence points to the logical conclusion that the employment of a small number of signs to represent the elementary sounds originated with the Semites, of which race the Phoenicians were a branch, and that it is from this source that the English alphabet has come down to us through the Greek and Latin alphabets.

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READER'S PAGE

PSEUDONYM?

Dear Editor,

Well, the latest issue of dear old FANTASTIC ADVENTURES is in, and another two bits is out the window. It's worth it, though. The first thing I noticed when I picked up the mag was the weight of it, in contrast to its thinness. After checking, I found that there were still 130 pages in the mag, and that the thinness was due to the type of paper used—a semi-slick type. Judging from the weight of it, it must be pretty heavy, too.

The cover this issue is very good. It surprised me to see another cover by Walter Haskell Hinton, but I was very pleased. Hinton is a very good artist, as is evidenced by his cover. I hear he is going to have a space cover on a future issue of IMAGINATION, Bill Hamling's mag. Speaking of IMAGINATION, that mag seems to have stolen one of your best authors from you—namely, Charles F. Myers. Also, they recently featured a short novel by Geoff St. Reynard. Does this mean that you've lost him too?

Hmmmmmmm... Ivar Jorgensen is about the most phony sounding name that has ever graced your contents page. A novel about Norsemen by a Norseman is okay, but it seems that you went overboard to put over that point. If I ever heard of a more Norse-sounding name than Ivar Jorgensen, it must have been Leif Erikson. Also, I noticed that you used a drawing instead of a photograph for your Men Behind FA department, and that the artist (Leo Ramon Summers?) went a little too far in trying so hard to depict a Norseman.

Perhaps I'm wrong about this being a *nom de plume*, but I don't think so. I've already been proved wrong on two guesses about pen names, namely Mack Reynolds and Edmond B. Swiatek, so I guess it's about time for me to be right.

Speaking of Swiatek, why no more covers by him? His cover for "War of the Giant Apes" was very good. I haven't even seen any interior illos by him for some time.

While on the subject of artists: I don't like Leo Ramon Summers very much. His work always seems like it has been done hastily. The best artist you have is Henry Sharp. This new boy, Gerald Hohns, is pretty good, too.

Orchids and all that for your Men Behind departments in AS and FA. But how about putting them on the back, so that anyone wanting to cut out and save the pictures of the authors could do so without mutilating the cover.

Why not drop your ads for the next issue of your companion mag from the inside of the back cover and put the Rosicrucian ad there, so that you would have the back cover for paintings, such as you had up until 1948? I'm sure that you would sell a lot more copies by such a procedure.

I'm afraid I'll have to disagree wholeheartedly with Jan Romanoff this issue. He says that FA's best issues were in 1948 and 1949, while in 1950 they got into a rut. Looking back on those issues, I find that 1949 was spotlighted by such stories as Wilcox's "Eye of the World", Phillips' "Involuntary Immortals", and Alexander Blade's "Man Who Laughed at Time", and also FA's best issue to date, the October one, with a very good cover by Swiatek again.

1948 was spotlighted by such stories as "Man From Yesterday", "Dimensions Unlimited", "Court of Kublai Khan", "Secret of the Serpent", and so on. It seems that '48 and '49 are about even.

But when it comes to 1950 they are both overshadowed. 1950 was FA's best year, with such stories as "Dreaming Jewels", "Shades of Toffee", "You're All Alone", "When the World Tottered", and so on. Best story FA (or AS for that matter) has ever published was "Eye of the World". Man what a story!

So Ted Sturgeon is coming next issue. Hope it's as good as "The Dreaming Jewels". It sounds terrific. Maybe illustrated by Finlay, pretty please?

Terry Carr
134 Cambridge Street
San Francisco 12, California

Dear Ed:

I was wondering when you were going to give another artist a chance on the cover. Though R. G. J. is quite good, one can stand the same thing over and over again just so long. Good cover.

Say—this issue of FA (June) runs to 130 pp! What happened? Is this length going to continue? If it is, I have a suggestion. Instead of running a comparatively short novel and three or four shorts, why not run a lengthy novel of around 70,000 words and just one or two shorts? I wonder what the readers would think of this idea.

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This particular issue reminds me of the issues of '48 and '49 which were two of your best years. Bringing us such fine new fantasies as "The Court of Kublai Khan", "Queen of the Panther World", "The Man From Yesterday", "This Way to Heaven", and "Eye of the World". Those were the stories. You will have a hard time reaching such a high standard again. It *could* be done though.

"Whom the Gods Would Slay" in this issue was up to the standard I have mentioned previously. I would like to know what Ivar Jorgensen's real name is. I have it on *excellent* authority that it *is* a pen name. Who, who, who? It couldn't perchance be—ah—say, Geoff St. Reynard?

"Conditioned Reflex" by McGivern was one of his best efforts to date. Rates second.

"Three Against the Roum" seemed unnecessarily drawn out. If anything is detestable in a story it is drawn out endings. Still good though. Didn't read the other two shorts.

All in all, an improvement over earlier issues.

Jan Romanoff
26601 So. Western
Lomita, California

And why shouldn't Ivar Jorgensen's real name be just that? What's wrong about a Norseman with a Norse name writing about Norsemen? Nothing! And why a drawing of Ivar instead of a photograph? Well, his pic was received in the mails in a very tattered condition—so Artist Leo Summers drew the likeness. Watch this Jorgensen—he's got some good stuff coming up....Ed.

ALL OUT FOR IVAR!

Dear Editor:

After reading your June issue I have only one comment to make—Wonderful.

The cover is the best I have seen on any magazine in the two years I have been reading s-f.

I simply can not help raving about the first story in this issue, namely "Whom the Gods Would Slay". I would like to take time out at this point to say that your article on "Men Behind Fantastic Adventures" is a wonderful idea and very interesting. It is rather nice to get an idea of what the authors are like and what makes them tick.

My second choice of stories goes to "Three Against the Roum" (this rates ever so slightly after the first story). The other stories follow in this manner:

"The Brain That Lost Its Head"
"Conditioned Reflex"
"You Can't See Me".

This is the first letter I have ever written to an s-f magazine because I simply had to let you know how much I enjoyed this last issue.

By the way I would like to find out how other s-f fans rated the picture, "The Thing" after they see it. So here's hoping they write and give their opinions on it in your future magazines.

Mrs. Louise Wood
1880 Garfield
East Cleveland, Ohio

Dear Editor:

I just purchased the June issue of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES and all the stories were wonderful. I have listed below the way I rate them. I would like to see more work of Ivar Jorgensen.

1. "Whom the Gods Would Slay", by Ivar Jorgensen.
2. "Three Against the Roum", by Robert M. Williams.
3. "You Can't See Me", by William F. Temple.
4. "Conditioned Reflex", by William P. McGivern.
5. "The Brain That Lost Its Head", by Alfred Coppel.

I also wish to say I like the paper you use and the compactness of the magazine.

I liked the cover by W. H. Hinton very much.

Mrs. W. Cloer
8 Elizabeth Street
Poquonock Bridge, Conn.

Dear Editor:

I've been a steady reader of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES and AMAZING STORIES for several years, and this is the first time I've really felt the urge to write you.

I'm an amateur science-fiction writer and have written several stories that I've never sent to mgazines for approval. I hope to make it my chosen occupation in the future.

But to get to the point of this letter, I want to congratulate Ivar Jorgensen on the story or rather novelette (June 1951) "Whom the Gods Would Slay" and I hope to see others by said author. And how about some other stories by Clee Garson, "Nine Worlds West" (April, 1951).

Bob Parrish
Box 1766
Ketchikan, Alaska

Dear Editor,

I'm a mother of 5 children, but still find time to read all the s-f magazines I can find or buy or beg, too. I think the stories are fine, only please more "Toffee" stories than you've been putting in lately. I always look for V. Finlay's illos.

Ivar Jorgensen's "Whom the Gods Would Slay" was excellent.

Esther Orvis
Route 1
Seneca, Illinois

Dear Editor,

Thanks a lot for printing this letter in your mag.

Wha' hoppen? Two days ago I sauntered into the corner novelty store, walked up to the magazine rack, and picked up a copy of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES. I looked it over, and said to myself: "My, it seems that this ish is a little on the thin side." Thin? When I laid my 25c on

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the counter, the woman behind same told me I had two mags in my hand.

Outside of that, it was a very good issue.

Ivar Jorgensen did a magnificent piece of work on "Whom the Gods Would Slay". A superb fantasy.

Don't want to take up too much space, so I'll just sum up the rest of the edition quickly.

"You Can't See Me"—very good.

"Conditioned Reflex"—excellent.

"The Brain That Lost Its Head"—fair.

"Three Against the Roum"—very good.

I'm only 13 years old, and if there are any other bems my age who read s-f magazines, I would like to hear from them.

Joel Nydahl
Route 1, Box 913
Marquette, Michigan

Dear Ed:

I was deeply impressed by Ivar Jorgensen's style of writing in "Whom The Gods Would Slay" in your June issue. He has a magic touch and I hope to see more of him.

Hinton's cover was well done per usual.

"Conditioned Reflex" was not as up to W. P. McGivern's par as "Fix Me Something To Eat" (May issue) was. Among other things, it was too short. Speaking of short things, what happened to your 160 page FA mag?

"Three Against the Roum" was a little corny but it did have a lot of action.

"You Can't See Me"—fair.

"The Brain That Lost Its Head" was very good reading matter.

In closing I would like to congratulate you on the smoother paper for your mag, but cut edges—Pulleeze.

Melvyn Chase
1119 Foster Ave.
Brooklyn, N. Y.

Dear Editor:

What's this I see on gazing over the June issue of FA (which came here about two weeks too late)? A well-known rule of literature has been violated. In case you haven't guessed by now, I am referring to "Three Against the Roum". I happen to have read "Doom Ship", and so did not expect a very good story, but I was rather pleasantly surprised by seeing a sequel that is not only as good as its predecessor, but actually far better.

Of course, "Doom Ship" was crying for a sequel, it being really only half finished. This story actually finished it, and was a far better piece of work than was "Doom Ship". No, it wasn't wonderful, but there was humor of a sort, and the characters were drawn a bit more clearly, and thus seemed really "alive". That of Jorgensen and also the blue man, were rather well done. Too bad, though, that you didn't use the same artist for "Three Against the Roum" as you did for "Doom Ship."

While I'm talking about stories, I might as well give my ratings.

First place— "Conditioned Reflex." So true to human nature. By-the-by, isn't McGivern the one who wrote a short-short called "Author Unknown" that was published in FA quite a while ago? A story about an editor's receiving a manuscript written by God.

Second place— "Whom the Gods Would Slay". Don't ask me why, but somehow or other, lately none of your lead novels have been the best in the issue. This one was very good, besides being a neat idea, one that is rather new. By the way, the first half of the story was much better than the second half in my opinion, where he describes the Vikings and their customs. Let's have more of Mr. Jorgensen.

The other three were all lumped together, though they were all quite good, being so near to each other in quality that it's hard to give exact places.

"You Can't See Me"—perhaps the best of the three worst. At least there was a nice twist. Good.

"The Brain That Lost Its Head"—very good, nice new twist on those poor, overworked thinking machines. One question: Was Meek an android? Somehow, Coppel seemed to insinuate it.

"Three Against the Roum"—nuff said above.

All in all, a pretty good issue, with no flops, tho' no smashes.

Incidentally, the illos were good, with "You Can't See Me" being the only disappointment. I especially liked the ones for the lead novel. Your cover was actually illustrating the lead novel though. Hurray! Also a not too sad farewell to having all covers consist only of girls dressed in G-strings.

Before I sign off, I agree heartily with Mr. Booth in his article on s-f in TV and radio. I tried for a long time to get to listen to "Space Cadet" or something of that ilk, and at last the night came when I heard it. Alas for the time wasted searching. I could have been reading Mickey Mouse and gotten more s-f. But there should be good programs on TV and radio, since some of the best books and short stories would be perfectly adapted for either medium. Take Bradbury's "Martian Chronicles"—any one of the stories would have been perfect for radio adaptation or TV. Say, maybe that's what they ought to do. Hire the authors to rewrite some of their stories for video or radio. We will now bow our heads to Mecca (Mars) and pray.

Arline Gingold
60 Elm Street
Ellenville, N. Y.

This was a wonderful reception for Ivar. No author can ask for a much greater welcome from his readers. And to show you his thanks, Ivar has just written a 3,600-word short story, titled "A Handful of Dust", which will appear in either the October or November issue of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES. About this story, we predict that you will have much to say. It's the kind of yarn that grips you with

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the opening sentence, and doesn't let go even after you've finished the story.

Albert Bernsen wrote "Author Unknown" (July 1950 FA). ..... Ed.

HE CAN'T FIND ANYTHING BAD

Dear Editor,

I began to read your FA from the February 1951 issue, and I think it is time to write you a few words about it. Good ones.

Here, in Greece, we don't have much in adventure books. And if from time to time such a book is published, it will never be a science-fiction one (or nearly never). So, when in January I saw FA at the newsstands (it was the first time I noticed it) it drew my attention. But I didn't buy it because I thought it to be just like some Greek ones I have read, only with a more fancy front cover.

But when I saw the February issue and when I bought it (you see, I like very much the ancient Egypt fantasy stories) I understood how wrong I was and what I had lost. Because no matter how much I searched I couldn't find a bad thing and I gave up searching.

In this issue the best one was "The Sword of Ra". Then came "The Dark Balcony" and third "Rebirth". My favorite writer is Geoff. St. Reynard, and favorite painter Arnold Kohn. Let's have more stories like "The Sword of Ra".

"Secret of the Flaming Ring" in the March issue and "Nine Worlds West" in the April issue were good and I enjoyed them, too, but not as "The Sword of Ra".

That is my poor opinion about your magazine and its contents.

Ending, I want to tell you that I know the story Gertrude Whittum asks for in the April issue. I've read it in Greek and I am not sure about its title in American so I translate it from Greek. It is "The World That Has Been Lost" by Erl Kox (I translate the name of the writer, too).

I wish for FA to go to greater things.

P. Artis
Athens, Greece

We get a real thrill out of being read in far-off Greece. Thanks for your nice comments. ..... Ed.

WINNIPEG FEN: NOTE!

Dear Les,

I was quite stunned when I saw my letter in the latest ish of FA. To tell the truth, I'd completely forgotten that I'd written in. Well, I see that I'd promised to write in every ish and I have neglected to do so. Guess I might as well try to remedy this now.

I shan't attempt to criticize the stories as I'm afraid that since I'm 80 or so issues behind, I couldn't do this. Anyway, I have a few things to say.

1. I'm glad that those articles have been somewhat toned down and something that is likely to appeal to fen been somewhat substituted. Those complicated articles you used to carry really floored me.

2. I'm deeply saddened to see that FA is only 130 pages. War shortage?

3. Is there any chance of getting a "Conrad, the Saxon" epic like you carried once or twice?

4. Though the ish hasn't been read, I feel sure that it is a great improvement over former issues. I might even venture to say (sight unseen almost) that it is better than the ish I last commented on.

Which about constitutes my letter, except for one announcement if you can sneak it in somewhere?

All fen situated in Wpg. please take note. For some two months now, the Wpg. stf. society has been organized. We have reorganized the C. S. F. A. and its organ should be out by the time you read this. After that, if there is a big enough appeal, we are drawing up plans for a Wpg. 'zine which will be an All Canadian product. The illos, stories, stf. items used will be submitted by the fen themselves. We feel that the 'zine and the newsletter will put a long needed desire to its end.

On browsing over the first and practically only ish of the former C. S. F. A., I found the following statement which I hope will not happen this time. The statement is: "We feel that the C. S. F. A. will fill the vacuum which has long existed." Apparently the vacuum was too great and the C. S. F. A. was swallowed up within it. Help to keep the C. S. F. A. going by subscribing. Big things are in the doing for Canadian fen. Please send all inquiries to the below address.

Well, thanks Les, for letting me take up your valuable time. Keep up the good work.

Douglas Mitchell
Ste. 11-406 Notre Dame Avenue
Wpg. Manitoba, Canada

HELP! FOR FRED...

Dear Ed:

I started reading AS and FA about three years ago, but I have a complete collection going back to 1941.

This letter, though, does not concern me but a friend of mine. This fellow, who is also 17 years old and lives in my apartment building, is an invalid. My friend Fred is also an AS and FA fan and has read many of my back issues. Fred is also making a small collection of his own. I have been buying him the issues but ran into some difficulty.

He is a fiend for Burroughs and "Adam Link" (so am I, but I also like "Oscar, Detective from Mars") and I have gotten most of the Edgar Rice Burroughs stories but cannot get the "Adam Link" stories for him.

For his collection Fred wants the issues (with the covers, for he collects them too, especially St. Johns) of AMAZING STORIES and FANTASTIC ADVENTURES containing "The City of Mummies" and the Pellucidan stories which follow "Return to Pellucidan" and "Men of the Bronze Age". Also "Jongor of Lost Land" by Robert

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Moore Williams and all the "Adam Link" stories by Eando Binder. Thank you very much.

If you can get any of the magazines wanted please send them to:

Fred Michael
629 West 135 Street
New York 31, N. Y.

Alexander Fundukis
New York, N. Y.

Knowing our readers as we do, Alex, we're sure they'll respond to the best of their abilities. Fred can start warning his mailman that the load is going to be a heavy one. ..... Ed.

WHO SHOT MAHOY?

Dear Sir:

Have read the March issue of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, especially the story "Secret of the Flaming Ring". I wish to congratulate author Costello.

The name which he gives to the dwarf leader, i. e. "Shot Mahoy" is pure magic. It is beyond words, mine, anyway. Marvelous! Shot Mahoy, I salute you!

Ever since I read the story, I have been going around bellowing "Shot Mahoy!" at all and sundry. These golden syllables fit themselves perfectly to a deep-throated stentorian shout.

When someone says, "How are you?", I howl back: "Shot Mahoy!"

In heavy traffic when some driver whose fenders I have crumpled hurls invective, I scream back: "Shot Mahoy!"

In crowded restaurants when a greasy waiter shouts across the room, "What'll it be?", I bellow "Shot Mahoy!"

In fact there is no situation with which I can't cope with the aid of those three powerful syllables.

Often I just walk along the street yelling, "Shot Mahoy!" just for the sheer ecstatic joy it gives me.

Costello, you are a genius. You have been touched by divine inspiration.

Oh, that wonderful name.

Shot Mahooooooooooyyyyyy!

Bart Mulliver
64 N. Balsam Avenue
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

GUESS HE DOESN'T LIKE US...

Sir:

I have been a reader of your magazine for as long as it has been published. I have watched it fall from a leader in its field to indescribably worthless trash.

I have read letters in your fan column suggesting ways to improve your magazine; and I have seen you condemn these suggestions as worthless. In effect, telling the readers what they could do if they didn't like it.

I have bought your magazine with despair for the last year, hoping against hope each issue would be better than the last. Vain hope! They get progressively worse.

This is to inform you that I have bought my last issue! That also goes for your companion magazine, AS.

The cheapest and most haphazardly put together magazine in the field is a credit to yours.

Your magazine will fold eventually, and I, for one, will be glad to see it.

L. W. Carpenter, D. D. S.
Franklin Clinic
Elizabethton, Tenn.

Tsk, tsk, Dr. Carpenter. Those are mighty strong words. ..... Ed.

BUT HE DOES!

Dear Sir:

I have always wanted to write a letter of praise to you, but somehow I never did. I always felt that I had something special to say about your magazine; now, I have something ultra-special!

Upon scanning the "Writer's 1951 Year Book" I came across an article by Allen K. Echols, "The Waning Woodpile". After thoroughly reading this article, I found I would have to agree almost completely with Mr. Echols. In the article, he proclaimed that "pulps" were degrading. Their stories, the magazines themselves, and their readers: All were continually growing cheaper. And in most cases, that fact is true.

However, you are the exception! FANTASTIC ADVENTURES and your companion magazine, AMAZING STORIES, have grown immensely in both quantity and quality. You, your staffs, the writers whose stories appear in your magazines, and your publishers are to be congratulated. Please (and I know you will) keep up the good work.

Harry C. Stevenson
348 West 21 Street
Erie, Pennsylvania

GOOD PACKAGING

Dear Ed:

I have just finished the July issue of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES. The lead story, "The Dead Don't Die!" by Robert Bloch and "The Traveling Crag" by Theodore Sturgeon are the two best in the issue. All the stories are good, but I liked "The Dead Don't Die!" especially. Let's have more of this weird type.

I agree with Paul Fairman, author of "Witness for the Defense." I never did like phophets of doom. I firmly believe, along with a lot of other people, that some day man will reach the stars. It may take a hundred or a thousand years, but he'll get there. and he will never entirely destroy himself through war. So much for the stories.

The editorial was interesting. The Reader's Page entertaining as usual. Mention was made of Laura Hills' letter in the April ish. When I read this letter, I thought of a novel written by Eric Frank Russell, called "Sinister Barrier". In it, invisible energy beings roam the earth,

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unknown to humans, except for a small group of scientists who discover a way to detect the Vitons, as they are called. These Vitons are invisible because they are too far up the color spectrum for limited human eyes to see. This sort of ties in with what Mrs. Hills had to say.

I must congratulate you on the new packaging of FA. It greatly improves the magazine's appearance, and makes it much easier to handle.

Wayne L. Fehr
3320 Carlisle Avenue
Covington, Ky.

PARDON US, OUR MISTAKE'S SHOWING

Dear Sir:

In the June issue of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES in the ending paragraph of The Editor's Notebook, you said that next month (the July issue) there would be a story called "Excalibur and the Atom". I have just bought the July issue and there is *not* a story in there called that. For 15 minutes, I studied and examined the magazine, but I can't find this "Excalibur and the Atom" by Theodore Sturgeon that you promised. Could it be that I have bought the only July issue that you have printed that doesn't have this story in it? Please, please give me an explanation.

Mr. Bill Olive, Jr.
604 Hawke Street
Fredericksburg, Va.

Ah, you caught us redhanded in—we hope—one of our very rare mistakes. "Excalibur and the Atom" was the lead story in the August issue of FA— "The Dead Don't Die!" was the lead story in the July FA. Sorry. ..... Ed.

CALL FOR TERRY CARR....

Dear Mr. Shaffer:

When...oh, when are you going to print another one of Pelkie's great "Toka" novels??? Of the many stories printed by FA, his ranks near the top.

The last of his novels—(the last to my knowledge, that is)—"Toka Fights The Big Cats", I read three times. So please—if you can't get Pelkie, get someone else to do a Toka yarn.

Praise!!! You've gone semi-slick. Now if there were only some nice trimmed edges...

The only good thing about the June issue was the cover. First Hinton I've ever seen. You're improving.

There's one thing about the letter column—(or rather, one person I'd like to know about)—just which is Terry Carr—he or she???? It seems that I have heard, but if I did, I've forgotten which it was.

Bobby Warner
Bessmay, Texas

SCARECROW SKELETON?

Dear LES:

According to last month's AMAZING you've stopped giving out originals for best letters. Why? And don't say not enough votes, either. How many votes do you expect when you stick your announcements right in the middle of the Reader's Page? In case you've returned to giving out illos, my vote goes to Alice Bullock.

Now for as many story comments as space allows:

"Witness For the Defense"—as much as I liked "Conditioned Reflex" I find myself agreeing with Fairman. Maybe I've got a superiority complex.

"The Dead Don't Die"—it bored me.

"The President Will See You" and "There's No Way Out" were cute bits of nothing that I liked.

"The Traveling Crag" had some high spots, but on the whole it was only fair. The others were fair.

Cover: The dame was OK, but why doesn't she just spit in the scarecrow's face? Or use him for a key? Skeleton key, that is. And what was that horrible "still 132 pages" box doing on the cover?

James Lynch
2630 Penn Ave, No.
Minneapolis, Minn.

Sorry, Jim, but we found that it was not practical right now for us to give out originals. So, for the time being, we have to drop the project. Perhaps we can revive it in the near future. ..... Ed.

MORE STRANGE PHENOMENA

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading the June issue of FA and would like to congratulate you on one of the best editions you've had in a long time. "Whom The Gods Would Slay" by Ivar Jorgensen was simply superb. We must have more by this excellent writer.

"Three Against The Roum" was also very good, but could have been longer. Surely, you could have made a novel out of this. Your two short-shorts were wonderful! "Conditioned Reflex" was the best of them, and was also slightly frightening, for if the face of God really did show up in the sky, the people would probably act in the exact same way as the story portrayed. "The Brain That Lost Its Head" was unusual, and had a twang of Bradbury to it. "I Can't See You" was very good. I'll have to close my eyes sometimes....

I have a good deal of comment to make on your Reader's Page, so here goes: I noticed a letter by a Mrs. Marlyn McCann who had the nerve to degrade Fort, one of the greatest men the world will ever know. There have been thousands of amazing phenomena through the years, such as strange fireballs hurtling from the sky, fish pouring from the sky hundreds of miles inland, people bursting into fire, etc., and only a few great thinkers like Fort have had the intelligence to record and explain these amazing happenings, showing themselves as great thinkers, and crusad-

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ers for a world where the people are able to know about the strange things going on about them.

I also am quite sure that we are property, and that the flying saucers are mere observational devices from our owners. Mrs. McCann is going to get a hail of letters, and she deserves every one of them (other than those praising her, of course!). Willy Markham's letter was interesting, even though I think very definitely that science is a necessary part of science fiction. Gwen Cunningham had a very interesting epistle, and I always enjoy reading hers.

Anybody who has any of the following magazines will get a good price for them from me: All Thrill Book, Science Wonder Stories and Air Wonder Stories. I have a first edition of the "War of the Worlds" in excellent condition except that it has no jacket, and will sell for very low price —also will sell "Pilgrims in Time and Space", a history of s-f which no true fan can afford to miss.

Robert Dennis McNamara
50 Plaza Street
Brooklyn 17, N. Y.

A FIRST LETTER

Dear Mr. Shaffer:

Since this is my first letter to your mag, I won't make it too long. I have just finished reading the June issue and it was terrific; each story was very good, but here is my rating:

1. "Whom The Gods Would Slay"— Wonderful.
2. "Conditioned Reflex"— Pretty Good.
3. "The Brain That Lost Its Head"— Good.
4. "Three Against the Roum"— Okay.
5. "You Can't See Me"— Passable.

Now for some suggestions: First, throw out those crummy ads that hang around the back of the book. Second, how about a good 45,000 word novel, at least 40,000. And now may I ask who's got the rest of the pages to the last issues. I only counted 130. You wouldn't know, would you?

I would like to know if any reader is willing to sell the issue with the first installment of "The Eye of the World"?

The cover on this issue was exceptionally good. I also like the new use for the inside cover. And now a threat: If you don't print this letter there'll be reinforcements, so you'd better give up now.

And now the age-old plea for more Toffee stories; ah, how I miss them.

D. Stewart
Brooklyn 21, N. Y.

We're printing this letter, Mr. Stewart, and we still want reinforcements. Always good to hear from our readers. ..... Ed.

A NEW FAN

Dear Sir:

Since I entered the realm of FA and AS a few months ago, I have not yet observed any letters in the Reader's Page from this part of the world. So I thought it was about time somebody spoke up their opinions from over here.

I consider that the FANTASTIC and AMAZING publications are the finest value for money obtainable in the field of science-fiction. The covers of these mags are really superb—what imaginations the artists must have to conceive!

The following stories, I thought, were really first rate:

"The Sword of Ra", "The Masters of Sleep", "When Two Worlds Meet", "Let Freedom Ring", and "The Mental Assassin". The various short articles are also quite interesting.

Unfortunately, copies of these magazines are not in very good supply over here, but being an ardent admirer of science-fiction, I pounce on every new issue and fight for it tooth and nail.

Well, that is about all for now, but I should like to mention that I should be pleased to hear from any other teen-agers who are interested in science-fiction.

Roy Scammell
14, New Zealand Way
London, W. 12, England

Okay, teen-agers. Let's give Roy a rousing welcome to the fold. ..... Ed.

BACK AGAIN...

Dear Ed,

Well, you asked for it. Here I am back again. You really took me at my word, didn't you? The June 1951 issue of FA was slightly terrific. One complaint though. What happened to the rest of the pages? I guess that old boogey, paper shortage, has crept in again. Well, as long as you keep up the quality of the mag I won't gripe too much. Speaking of quality, I see where you printed a magnificent epistle, in said issue, written by some guy named L. William Mohs, marvelous comp—hey that's me. Well, what do you know? I finally broke into print.

I would make a few comments anent the letters, but some dirty dog tore one whole page of the letter section out of my mag. Including the page with my letter. Perhaps he wished to preserve it for posterity.

I want to take this opportunity of thanking publicly those fans who responded to my appeal for correspondents. If there are any whose letters I have not received as yet, I include you. Thank you one and all. I still do not feel that the postman is working hard enough, so send those letters along. I have plenty of time to write letters, and I enjoy doing so. I would especially like to correspond with someone who lives somewhere in the vicinity of Olympia, Washington. I lived out that way for about a year, and still have a married sister there. Come on, Evergreen State, let's hear from you. All the other 47 too.

L. William Mohs
937 Fulton Street
Brooklyn 16, N. Y.

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THE MIRACLE OF WRITING

By Wilton Avery MacDonald

What other development has contributed so much to the advancement of mankind?

MAN'S PROGRESS from a barbarous state to one of civilization has been made possible through the medium of "writing". This art has been the means of preserving man's thoughts and transmitting them from generation to generation. No other development has contributed as much towards the advancement of mankind. All intellectual achievements are based on a system of communicating thought.

"Certainly the art of writing," says Carlyle, "is the most miraculous of all things man has devised. With the art of writing, of which printing is a simple, inevitable, and comparatively insignificant corollary, the true reign of miracles for mankind commenced."

The ancient peoples preserved a record of their daily actions and achievements on stone, clay tablets, and paper by inscribing thereon certain characters which form words that are used to convey the idea or thought of the person who made them. These words are not the same as the words we use today. Most of the words we now use can be broken up into parts, and these traced back to a parent language, so far back that our researches are lost in a prehistoric era.

In remote times, no abstract characters existed with which man could form words to express his thoughts. Intead, he used drawings and pictures as a means of expressing his idea and of recording his activities. These are the oldest forms of writing.

These pictures or symbols denote the object or idea of an entire story, in the whole. They are of necessity limited in their scope of expression. They were not detailed enough to be able to express the many varied experiences of the human race.

They are, however, the origin of the complicated systems we use today to express ourselves. As human experience broadened, picture writing gave way to phonetic writing where the characters employed denote the spoken word or its elements, either syllables or single sounds, such as vowels or consonants. At first, the pictures were blended into symbols and signs which were only conventionalized pictures. Then the Sumerians invented the cuneiform system of writing which was soon adopted by all the leading nations of Western Asia. This system originated in pictographs, also. It is a combination of idiograms, syllabic signs, and vestiges of the picture writings that preceded it. The invention of the alphabet was the end result of the need for a more definite means of expression.

THE AIRPLANE HAS A FUTURE

By Salem Lane

TODAY, WITH the airplane one of the "necessities" of our life, with so many of us practically commuting via air from coast to coast, from country to country, it seems completely fantastic that when the principle of the aerostat, or passive balloon, was discovered, the ignorant believed that this furnished a key to the method of travel used by the witches.

Ministre's HISTORY OF LYONS gives an account of what is probably the first recorded instance of aerial travel: "Toward the end of Charlemagne's reign, certain persons who lived near Mount Pilate, in Switzerland, knowing by what means pretended sorcerers traveled through the air, resolved to try the experiment and compelled some poor people to ascend in an aerostat. This descended in the town of Lyons, where they were immediately hurried to prison, the mob desiring their death as sorcerers. The judges condemned them to be burned, but the Bishop Agabard suspended the execution and sent for them to his palace that he might question them."

Benjamin Franklin had this to say about the new method of aerial navigation: "It is an infant, but it will grow."

We wonder what these men would say today if they could see our great bombers as they roar across the seas, our huge cargo planes as they carry foods and supplies, our jet-propelled vehicles as they speed their way through the air.

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THIS MODERN AGE . . .

By A. T. Kedzie

THE PRESENT concepts of the evolution of man are due for a rude shake-up, if subsequent studies bear out a theory which has been formulated by recently found evidence that a modern form of man lived at the same time as previously known primitive types—about 75,000 years ago. Dr. Carleton Coon, anthropologist, and his assistant, Louis Dupree, geologist, were digging in a cave near Behshahr on the Caspian Sea, when they uncovered three human skeletons in what appeared to be Pleistocene Age gravels.

The skeletons were found by the two men after they had dug through three gravel and three sand layers to a depth of about 39 feet. Since each gravel layer corresponds to the advance of ice, and each sand layer to the retreat of ice, the two scientists believe their find dates back to somewhere near the end of the third interglacial period, thus making it roughly 75,000 years old. This would suggest that a markedly modern type of man lived in Persia at the same time in earth's history that primitive man inhabited parts of Asia and Africa.

There were about seven feet of silt clays ending in a layer of kaolin, directly underneath the skeletons. This is evidence of a warm climate, probably in the third interglacial period. No human remains were found at this lower level, although there were crude flint tools.

On the basis of a preliminary field examination of the skeletons, Dr. Coon felt that it was possible that the true Homo Sapiens were older than the subhuman types—like the 50,000-year-old Neanderthal man—found elsewhere.

The three skeletons were found below the surface of the cave called Hotu. Apparently, the three prehistoric persons had been sitting around a hearth when the roof caved in and crushed them. Near the skeletons were crude flint and bone instruments, animal bones and charcoal. Above their heads was an intensive rock fall. The next occupation level—the Neolithic one—began about 15 feet below the surface and contained evidences of agriculture and domesticated animals. There were crude slow-fired pottery, bone implements and flint sickle blades polished through intensive use in reaping early cereals. Dr. Coon believes these remains date from 16,000 to 8,000 B. C., and that they may even point to the very beginnings of agriculture.

A crude type of painted pottery began to appear near the top of the Neolithic level, which in turn was replaced by a thin and well-fired painted pottery. The advent of the bronze or copper age was heralded by the appearance of well-fired

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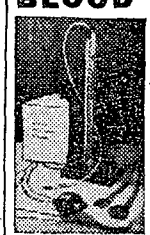

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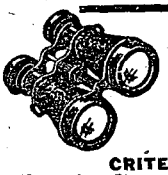

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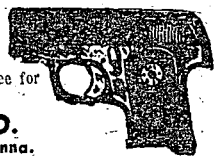

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pottery types in sophisticated shapes. One vase, for instance, had a handle in the form of a horse's head.

According to Dr. Coon and Mr. Dupree, the principal difference between the skeletons they found and modern man, is in the size of the cranium. While the skull of the Hotu Man is human in shape, his cranial capacity—about 1,150 cubic centimeters—is much smaller. The cranial capacity of modern man averages around 1,450 cubic centimeters.

In other respects, the Hotu Man is similar to many modern human types. He was about five feet eight inches tall, had a rather massive body structure with large hands and feet, long teeth, prominent molars, low eye orbits and a strong, perfectly formed human chin.

IS CIVILIZATION DOOMED?

WITH ALL his laws and by-laws, has civilized man built up a machine about him that will eventually destroy his civilization? Was he much better off in his prehistoric state? This is a question which many thinking persons are today discussing.

Actually, it is unreasonable to suggest that a helpful machine which man controls should be permitted to destroy the very civilization which gave it birth. The fault would not be in the machine—it would be in mankind's reaction and his attitude toward it.

Sure, the machine with its highly complex rulings may change the habits and activities of the men who did the work before the machine came into being. But we must remember that a basic rule of the Law of Evolution is an adaptation to environment. Man must adapt himself to changing conditions the same way that all his ancestors have done. In this way—and only in this way—can there be an ever-developing growth for Man. You can't buck the laws of Nature; you have to accept them. —*Jack Winter*

SHE'S NO SLOUCH!

By
Frederic Booth

SCIENCE is justifiably proud of the power of the atomic bomb, if not of the use to which it will be put. Man has conquered Nature and bettered her by bringing to Earth a miniature chunk of the Sun. This is a terrific accomplishment, but its true measure must be taken by what Nature herself can do. And

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Mother Nature is still no slouch by any standards.

For example, ask the seismologists about atomic bombs and they'll laugh. "Oh, those piffling little things," they'll say. "Let us tell you about last year's earthquakes. Now, there's power!" And they'll be right. At a conservative guess, it is estimated in terms of actual work done, the earthquakes were the equivalent of four million atomic bombs! That is the amount of energy released by earthquakes.

Unknown to most of us, convulsions of the Earth's crust are real energy generators and they make our efforts at destruction look mighty puny. Perhaps that will change when the hydrogen bomb is developed but we'll still have to go some before we can approach that gross figure of four million atomic bombs.

MEN BEHIND FANTASTIC ADENTURES

(*continued from second cover*)

in his victories. But *then,* if while flushed with his hero's triumph, the writer removes the mask to take a bow—then watch his face go white when he hears the faint, ghostly jingling of the jester's bells.

Which is to say: I am amazed to learn, after giving it some thought, that I have done nothing very startling with my twenty-eight years.

I was born in a small town in east Florida where deep cypress swamp merges with beach-resort to form a hybrid geography whose fauna consists of Boston schoolmarms, New York bookies, Portuguese fishermen, citrus growers, and swamp-sloggers with shoes ventilated for bunions. Characters all. I grew up there, an only child. An only child usually has too many toys and can't decide among them. As he grows older, he may come to regard *ideas* as toys.

Perhaps for that reason my teenage ambitions leaped about a bit: paleontology, biology, merchant seagoing, writing, chemistry, and horticulture. Sometimes I wistfully hoped that I could follow several of these pursuits

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at once. My father, being a practical man, geed and hawed until he finally got me steered toward engineering. On such a pretense, I registered at the University of Tennessee in 1939. But around the campus I soon added physics, poetry, and philosophy to my list. Whatever course looked interesting, I took. For three semesters.

But one day the dean jerked me away from this intellectual smorgasbord and said, "Son, most students find the time to take a few of our *required* courses. Why don't you?"

"You mean—specialize?" I choked.

"Indeedy!"

I felt robbed. The concept that education involved responsibility came as a shock. I shuffled out of the dean's office and fled to Uncle Sam's Air Force—to escape the menace of specialization.

A year later, I was riding behind the bomb bays of a B-25, and my only duties were operating the radio and firing a pair of fifty-calibre waist-guns at passing *Focke Wulfs*. They had whittled me into a specialized peg and fitted me into a tight hole. Other specialists shot at me. It was so cold you could bounce spit off the bulkhead as ice, but I sweated. Sitting on a flak-vest and wearing another, I decided it was *digitus Dei* that put me here, and that the punishment fitted the crime.

Nevertheless, we had fun—grim, ungodly fun—through fifty-five missions over Greece, Yugoslavia, Albania, Italy and Bulgaria. Nobody admitted it, but it was like driving hot-rods or playing Russian roulette or gang-brawling. It was sublime, ridiculous and brutal. The civilized cloak is flung aside, and there stands the pale ape, teeth bared. For a potential writer, war can be a priceless experience—

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seeing men behave as they might always behave *sans* society's restraints. It helps him get insight into human motives, in a nightmare world where urges are seldom inhibited. It helps him shape the underlying animal-stuff of his characters before clothing them in a social soul.

But in 1945, I was back where I started: looking for a profession, interested in many things but unwilling to exclude all but one. I tried selling: tires, life insurance, air conditioning. I felt like a clothes-horse for somebody else's ideas. Then I met a man who had a pet theory—like this: "Education is superfluous. Anything can be learned on-the-job." So, armed with very little college, I went to work as a junior engineer for his power company. His theory was right, modified by this addendum: "As long as the learner doesn't care *why* the job is done this way or that."

I stuck for two years. Then I began to get curious about the *meaning* of the work I was doing. With the help of Uncle Sam and a part-time job in electronics repair, I went back to college—the University of Texas. For the first time in my life, I completely pushed aside all hope of ever becoming a writer—even though I had never tried. I classed it as an adolescent whim that must have hung on too long.

Digitus Dei again. A few months before graduation, a Buick and I collided head-on, breaking both my legs and an arm—my writing arm. Six months in bed. Six more on crutches. But the arm cast came off first, and the doctor said, "Writing's good wrist exercise. Builds up atrophied muscles. Get to work."

He waddled out and left me fuming. I wrote. Letters, essays, diatribes denouncing specialization—everything but commercial literature. One day a

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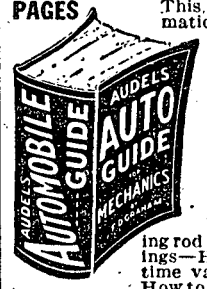

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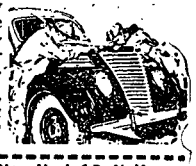

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friend came to call—a priest who had visited Molokai—and we talked about leprosariums. When he was gone, I thought idly— "Suppose a priest who was a hyprochondriac were given a parish in a leper colony . . ."

Suddenly I was writing. The idea was a natural. The short story was conceived, written and mailed in the same day. Back came a check from a semi-slick publication. My priest caught leprosy, thereby curing himself of hypochondria, but I caught another disease—writer's heart.

That was late in 1949. For a time, I dabbled in "artistic" stuff for magazines nobody reads. It was a good way to practice, but the pay in that field is a handful of pennies and quiet sneers from Ph.D.'s. One grows saddened quickly there.

My stories always grow from the seed of a single sentence. One day I sat down and wrote: "Barney Willis came in out of the desert and died." In view of what I had been writing, it didn't make much sense at first. But three days later, off went "Secret of the Death Dome" to *AMAZING*—my first science-fiction yarn. Since then, I've written little else but scifantasy, straying only occasionally for a change of pace.

Writing seems an excellent way to be a jack-of-all-trades, to invade every field of interest and to explore a wide variety of ideas. Emotional and intellectual specialization is avoided—by merging oneself now with one character and then another. But always—when the character-mask is off—there comes that sound: the faint silvery tinkle of the jester's bells, whispering —"A writer is a pretentious jackass." I think, however, that as long as one listens to them, and nods humbly, he's not likely to become a really *bad* writer.

Walter M. Miller, Jr.

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by Edwin Benson

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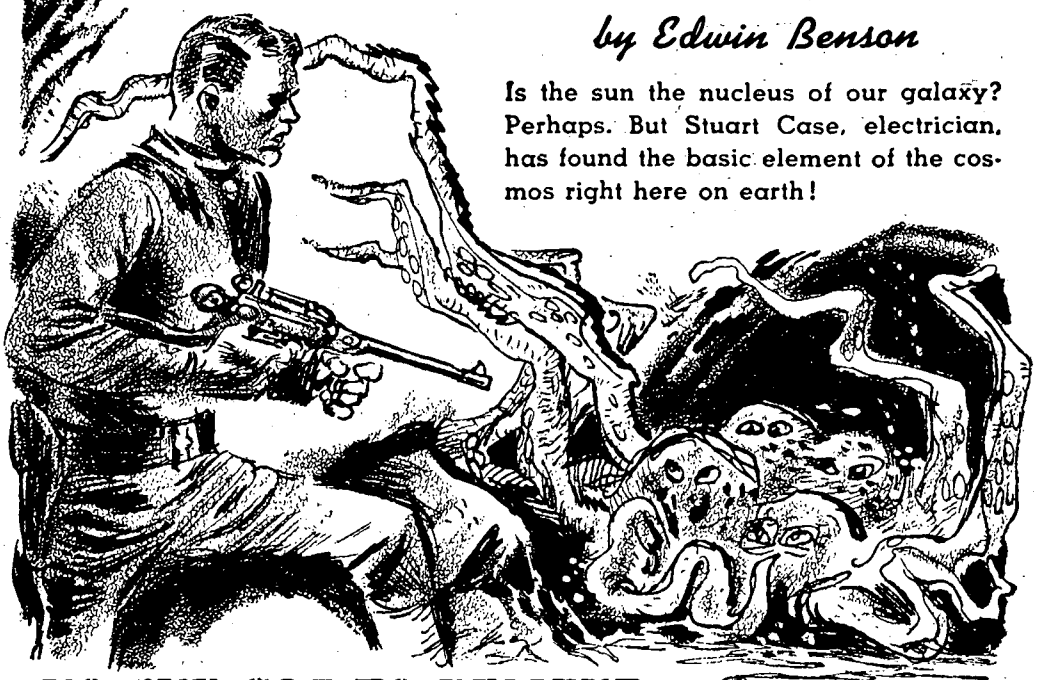

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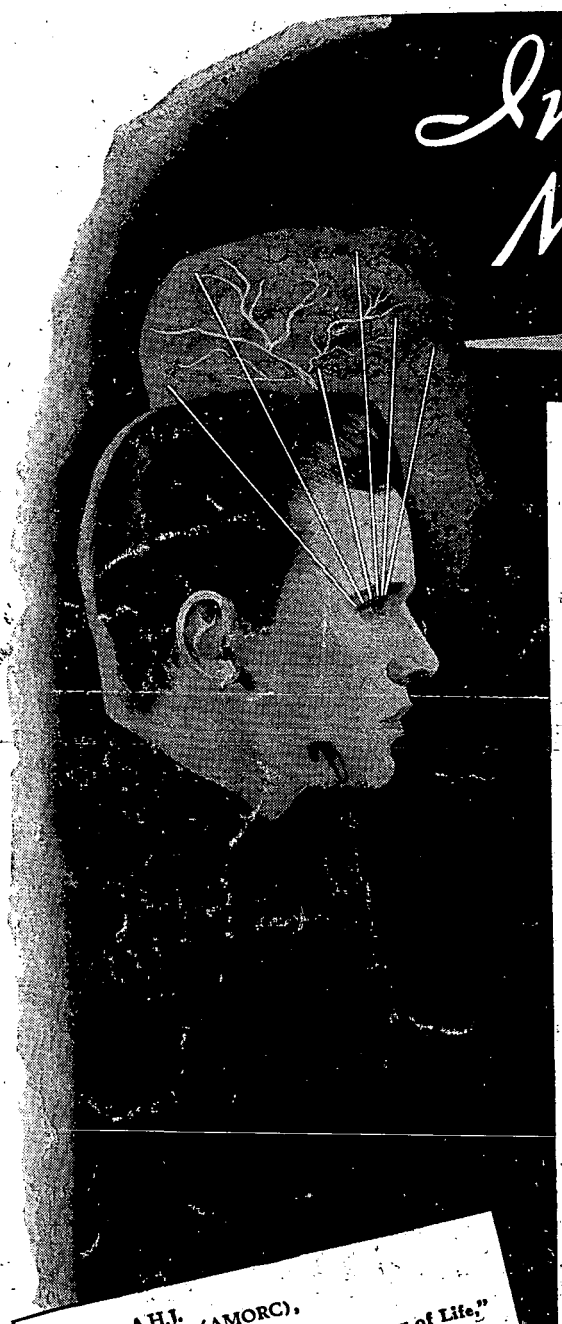

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